

**AN EXTRAORDINARY THRILLER.
A WRITER TO WATCH OUT FOR.**

Ravi Subramanian

BRUTAL

UDAY SATPATHY



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Published by
Bloody Good Book, an imprint of Bushfire Publishers LLP
6th Floor, Core House,
Off C. G. Road, Nr Parimal Garden
Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad - 380006

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ISBN: 978-81-931821-0-9

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ISBN: 978-81-931821-0-9

*To my wife Astha,
for believing in me more than I did,
&
To my little boy Vivaan,
for all the happiness in my life.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Some people inspire you, some guide you and some live your dream as if it's their own. I have been blessed to have the support of all these wonderful people throughout the journey of writing this book.

I am indebted to my wife Astha Agarwal for continuously encouraging me and critiquing my work since its inception. My heartiest thanks to dear friends Subhasis Mohanty and Soumya Prakash Patra for going through umpteen unedited versions of my book, and providing their invaluable input. A word of thanks to my family too – Uttam Satpathy, Usha Rani Satpathy and my parents. I couldn't have been what I am without you.

I am deeply grateful to Niyati Patel, Rashmi Bansal and the whole Bloody Good Book and Westland team for leaving no stone unturned in making my book better. Selecting a book through crowdsourcing is a novel concept in the Indian publishing industry, and I believe www.bloodygoodbook.com will scale new heights in the future. That *Brutal* is the first product of such an initiative is a source of immense joy and pride for me. This book has been made possible only by the love, praise and constructive advice from the author-and-reader community at Bloody Good Book. Keep reading and backing new voices!

THANK YOU

Brutal is India's first crowd sourced and crowd curated book. Its publication wouldn't have been possible without the contribution of these and many other amazing Bloody Good Book members. Thank you for reading and reviewing *Brutal* on www.bloodygoodbook.com. Your vote helped publish *Brutal*.

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Neha Lokhande Rajput

Vidhya Devaraj

Niyati Shinde

Antony Varghese

Mark Fong

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BOOK 1

PROLOGUE

2 AM, BANDHAVGARH NATIONAL PARK

In pitch darkness, Kunal Chaubey dashed through the thick foliage, ignoring the branches and twigs clawing into his flesh. Webs of overhanging roots kept getting in his way, lacerating his face like barbed wires. Yet, he ran like a mad man. He didn't know where he was going. He just wanted to get out of this damned forest.

For the last half an hour, his legs had been charging through the dense shrubbery, unmindful of the rodents crawling beneath. His skin was itching and stinging at odd places, with insects swarming all over. Some of them could be poisonous, he knew. But right now, what terrified him more was the realization that his body was tiring.

Even though he was a young man, all his vitals were running on overdrive. He was wheezing, with lungs on fire and legs quivering with muscular cramps. If things continued this way, he knew he would fatigue himself to death. Still a better way to die than falling into the hands of the monsters, he thought, his hands tightening around the handle of the axe he was holding. His palm was sweating and fingers trembling, but his grip on the weapon didn't budge one bit. It was his saviour. The only thing that stood between him and the predators.

For now, he had stolen a lead on his pursuers. They were in shock. They hadn't expected him to resist, much less fight back. But fight he did, surprising even his own instincts, for he had been a spineless wimp

throughout his life. His aggression, however, was only momentary. It had come and gone like a flash of light. He was no longer a warrior, but a man running terrified.

Since his childhood, he had been afraid of the dark. And it was not some bullshit phobia psychiatrists called by weird names. It was real. Far too scary to be explained to people. He had seen things in his life people would prefer not seeing even in nightmares. Things lurking in the black shadows, slithering through the branches of trees. Like a cloud of soot that has life.

His parents had taught him to deal with these sinister entities. 'Just ignore them', they said. 'It's all in your mind, these creatures from hell. They can't touch you. They can't harm you.'

How wrong were Mom and Dad? They could not fathom how close they were to their own harrowing deaths. Two years ago, the demons took them away, leaving behind a contorted mass of blood and burnt flesh. Looking no different from the twisted metal they were entangled with.

People called it a gruesome car accident. *Sheer ignorance, again.*

They had not gone away because of the mistake of a drunken truck driver. The man was driving beyond the speed limits, no doubt, but in his own lane. It was his parents' car which, coming from the opposite direction, had swerved inexplicably, and leaped over the divider and run into the giant vehicle. Nobody could explain why, except him. The reason was evident on the victims' disfigured faces, which resembled those of roller-coaster riders in an uncontrolled free fall. Their gaping mouths, bulging eyes and raised eyebrows had preserved the horror of their final moment like a negative film does. A moment in which they realized that their son's wild imaginations were no longer just 'imaginations'.

The incident left him shattered, filling his heart with dread. His guardian angels had departed. There was now no one left to save him. Thus far, the demons had kept a distance from him, prowling only in the shadows. But now that they had tasted blood, there would be no stopping them.

And they came, as expected, not allowing him even a night of mourning.

They came out of the darkest of corners of his house, their tentacles crawling out from the shadows. Alone and cornered, he knew only one way of escaping. *Run. Just run.* He left his home, beginning a life where he was always on the move. But, the creatures never gave up on him. They stalked him everywhere – in desolate stretches of road, in movie theatres, in

supermarkets, in his engineering hostel and now today even in this wilderness.

Whump! Lost in his thoughts, Kunal tripped and fell forward on the ground. His cheeks and nose brushed against the soil. It felt moist. He picked himself up and looked around. It was a river bank. A stream of water lay ahead, gleaming under the stars. *Thank God!* With elated spirits, he marched towards the stream.

He began walking along the bank, hoping to run into a human settlement soon, where he would get shelter, and more importantly, protection. A cool breeze comforted his burning skin, luring him towards the waves caressing the coastline. Shifting the axe into his left hand, he bent down and splashed water onto his face. It felt rejuvenating. He stood there briefly, taking a few deep breaths.

His nostrils picked up a slightly pungent yet familiar smell. He instantly recognized it. What surprised him was that it was coming from his axe. *No way!* He frowned and brought its sharp edge close to his nose. A dark, viscous liquid was dripping from the blade. Its smell was now unmistakable. *It can't be.* Warily, he dabbed a finger in the thick liquid and put it into his mouth. Every shred of doubt in his mind evaporated right away. It was human blood – salty and slightly metallic in taste. He brooded for a few seconds, and then shook his head dismissively. There was no way it could be human blood.

It was the blood of the monsters he had killed.

EIGHT YEARS LATER

Something woke Prakash Sinha up. He felt dizzy, his eyes burning as he tried to part his eyelids. He looked at the wall clock and groaned. 8:25 AM. *Damn. Yet another sleepless night.* He had slept only for 15 minutes. That was the best he had slept in two weeks.

He lifted his five-foot-ten body from the bed and stood up, immediately greeted by a pinching sensation in his right knee. Yeah, good morning to you too, he sneered, stretching his leg. The pain had been bothering him since the last few days, stinging often when he got up or sat down. It was one of the ‘gifts’ from his last assignment. He stroked his fingers over his knee and noticed a tiny metal splinter protruding from his kneecap. *Another Goddamn piece of shrapnel. Not today!*

Today was a big day. He couldn’t allow it to go wrong. He was a Special Correspondent at Globe News, getting back into the field after three weeks of leave, a period he had spent in severe depression and trauma. His face looked wan, eyes bloodshot with dark circles under them. The salt-and-pepper hair he prided himself on appeared more salty than peppery. Yesterday, while looking at the mirror, he had remarked that he looked sixty. He was only thirty-five.

His ordeal began one month ago, when at the peak of a glorious career, he took up an assignment to cover a story in Banka. It was a Naxalite hotbed and a place notorious for the bloody battle between the government and the rebels. He had taken a team of cameraman Ojas Patel and a local freelancer

with him. Both of them had died in the very first week. He woke up in an ICU, his body full of shrapnel, enough to give him a lifetime of suffering.

The doctors were able to remove a few major chunks of metal from his neck, thighs and back. But they had to leave untouched the minor fragments embedded deep inside his body. He was discharged in a week – body fragile, mind tormented.

Night after night, he would wake up with a splitting headache and spasms coursing through his body. Some days, he would hear explosions and then squeeze his ears with hands. Nightmares made him spend nights under his bed in terror. He tried sleeping pills; even drinking, praying for an inebriated slumber which never came. It didn't take him long to realize that he was lying in a cemetery surrounded by graves. One belonged to his career. One to his happiness. And one to his life. All buried for good.

If someone had told him that he would soon leave the gloomy walls of his New Delhi apartment and fly to Allahabad to cover a story known as the 'Nitin Tomar case', he wouldn't have believed him. But he was well on his way to do it. And it was made possible by Seema Sharma, a close friend who was also an ace journalist with the Century News channel. She kept visiting him, often against his wishes, even on days he closed himself up in his room sulking in darkness. She was the only one who could persuade him to come out of his shell and get back into the field. Begin with an easy case, she said.

He had begun to hate journalism, maybe even fear it. But he also badly wanted things to get back to where they were a month ago. So, he agreed to her suggestion, just to give himself one desperate shot at redemption. He knew nothing about Nitin Tomar or the crime he committed. He was going as a blank slate, unprepared, like a rookie. Beginning his career again, like he did twelve years ago.

He picked up the mobile phone from the bedside coffee table. There was a message from Seema. *This must have woken me up.* He read it. 'You are coming to the court, right? Will kill you if I don't see you at 11:30 AM. He smiled and nodded in agreement. There was one more message. It was from Ritesh Pandey, his boss, the editor for crime beat at Globe News. It said: 'Best of luck. Be the stubborn bastard again that we all knew.'

He had a quick bath, dressed formally and then went over to the restaurant area of his hotel for a breakfast. It was a long time since he had eaten in public.

He was halfway through his breakfast when he saw a short, stout man with a balding head enter the restaurant. *Dilip More*. This man was his old companion and cameraman. Like him, Dilip also lived in New Delhi, but they hardly got to see each other nowadays.

Prakash smiled and called out his name.

Dilip looked back, smiling. "So, the lion is back into the game!" he said, before hugging him. It was a long hug. From a colleague who was now almost a brother.

"How is the great Dilip More assigned to such a low profile case?"

"Ritesh *Sirji* called me up. He said you are going to cover the Nitin Tomar case at Allahabad. That was enough for me to..."

"So you have come to babysit me?" Prakash muttered.

"Now c'mon *bhai*, everybody can do with some help," Dilip said, settling into a chair across from him. "Look at yourself. You look fucking tired."

"I am unable to sleep nowadays."

"I can understand what you've gone through," he said. "Dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is tough. Happened to me also after covering the Godhra riots. But..."

"I shouldn't have done the Banka story," Prakash said, avoiding Dilip's eyes. "We all knew how dangerous it was." His voice was almost a whisper.

"You are a journalist. And one of the best I know," Dilip said. "You of all people can understand that things sometimes go horribly wrong in the field. Doing a story in the Naxalite belt is a dreadful affair. Believe me – most of the big-shot journos would give it a pass. But you still managed it somehow."

"I got two of my colleagues killed, Dilip. That's how I MANAGED it," Prakash said with anger, looking into his eyes. "Ojas Patel is dead. And his wife..."

"No one blames you, Prakash. Whatever happened was sad. I mean it. But you cannot live with the pain. You have to move on."

Prakash nodded slowly, realizing he was losing it again. *Don't*.

"Now no more living in the past! You heard me? No more sad smileys," Dilip said and got up from his chair. "Let's go. We have a new story to cover. Just like old times." He tugged at his friend's arm, making him stand.

"Hmmm. But I haven't done any homework on this case," Prakash said with a sheepish grin.

"Don't worry. It's an open and shut case. They don't come easier than

this.” Dilip winked. “Perfect way for you to get back into action.”

Prakash nodded. He thanked Ritesh silently for teaming him up with Dilip.

He said, “Why don’t you brief me about this case?”

“That’s like my old boy!” Dilip said, with a broad smile. “Let’s get seated in our van first. I will tell you the whole story on the way. A police van carrying Nitin Tomar has already started for the court.”

11:30 AM, ALLAHABAD DISTRICT AND SESSIONS COURT

There was an unusual rush of people outside the Court on this hot summer day. The yard outside the imposing structure was swarming with hordes of youths, school children and other protestors. Two police rapid action buses and a fire tender stood aligned with the compound wall to control any aggression from the mob. A perimeter of ten meters in front of the court entrance was created by armoured police force carrying *lathis* and tear gas canisters.

The air pulsed with anger. The entire place was echoing with vociferous chants of ‘Hang the killers of humanity’ and ‘Enough crimes against women and children’. College youth and schoolchildren who had skipped their classes today were carrying banners with messages like ‘Death penalty is justice’ and ‘Crime against women and Children – Tolerate no more’.

The OB van of Globe News was caught in the heavy crowd. The driver shook his head with astonishment as he tried to manoeuvre through. “Forget about parking. There is no place to stand here,” he said. “And I can see the early signs of violence,” he added, pointing at a group of youths holding an effigy of Nitin Tomar. They were carrying the flags of a political party.

“Park here,” Dilip said, indicating a gap in the long lines of vehicles.

The driver frowned and said, “Won’t it be too far for you guys? It’s almost two hundred meters from the court gate.”

“It’s OK,” Dilip said with a shrug. “We will walk from here. If the crowd turns violent, at least our van will be safe.”

Prakash got down from the van. He held a microphone in his hand. Dilip followed him, carrying a bulky TV camera over his shoulder.

The heat outside made Prakash wince. More than the heat, it was the realization that he was back in the job he had started dreading. Beads of perspiration formed over his forehead. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

It took a few moments for him to absorb everything that was happening around – the tense atmosphere, the angry protestors and the wary policemen. It was not an ordinary scene. Not every day did people turn up in such large numbers for a hearing. It might have been a simple case, but it was surely one of the most anticipated ones in the country today.

The incident, a crime of shocking brutality, had occurred two months ago at the well-known Geetanjali Public School in Allahabad. That day, Nitin Tomar, a science teacher and now a figure hated far and wide across the country, massacred eleven school children in cold blood using a kitchen knife. Four more children were left maimed for life.

Most reports connected Nitin's actions to his depression, from a painful divorce a few months ago. He was furious after his wife won custody of their daughter.

The surprising element in this case was that he seemed to be perfectly alright a few hours before the crime. He was seen smiling and chatting with his fellow teachers in the school canteen. Nobody knew what transpired afterwards, which made him sneak in a sharp knife from the canteen kitchen and proceed towards Class IV-C. He entered the class to moans and protests from the little students telling him that his class was still half an hour away. He ignored them, closing the door and bolting all the latches tight. Before the children could grasp what was going on, Nitin took out his knife and stabbed two girls from the first desk. Aghast, a couple of kids ran towards the door. But, he cut them off before they could unlock it and butchered them like lambs. The remaining kids tried everything from praying and yelling to hiding behind their desks, but nothing was sufficient to stop this animal. Five minutes was what it took for the school security team to break the door and get in. In those five terrible minutes, he stabbed about nineteen students – some dying on the spot, some dying later in hospital. Only a few survived.

Eyewitnesses said that Nitin's eyes looked scary and full of nightmarish rage. Later on, he became violent even with his inmates in the police lock-up.

Hard to control like a rabid pit bull, he injured five inmates and four police constables when they tried to tame him. That night, his inmates beat him up with a vengeance, sending him into a coma. He was in the hospital for about three weeks, oblivious to the fact that the whole country was baying for his blood. The judiciary began the proceedings against him only when he was released from the hospital a couple of weeks later.

The police had a pretty straightforward case against Nitin Tomar. There was no way he could escape from the charges of manslaughter, attempt to murder and carrying a weapon with the intention of harm. The prosecution had even lined up a battery of special experts to thwart any attempts at an insanity plea. They wanted a noose around the sociopath's neck, at any cost.

As Prakash waded through the sea of protestors, he could empathize with their cause. A teacher as a demon was the last thing society wanted. Nitin Tomar deserved to be purged.

He, followed by Dilip, finally reached the crowd of journalists huddled up beside the entry gate of the compound. He felt somewhat better getting immersed in his community. Good or bad, he didn't know, but this was his world.

He looked around, but felt awkward due to the glances other journalists cast at him. Some were surprised, some sympathetic and some damn serious, as if thanking God that they were not in his place. Just ignore them, he muttered to himself.

His face brightened when he saw a few known faces he encountered in almost every assignment. The most familiar face among them was of a fair, beautiful woman with long wavy hair. She was wearing a short, Nehru-collared *kurta* over jeans trousers. *Seema Sharma*. She came towards him as soon as their eyes met.

"So happy to have you back," she said with a big smile. "For once, I thought I would never see you in the media again."

Prakash grinned. "I am still recovering."

"You will. You will," she said, squeezing his palm gently. "You've been one hell of a fighter throughout your life... and a pretty big prick as a competitor."

He laughed. The heaviness in his mind was lifting. Seema always made him feel like that.

He had a thing for Seema since their days together at Globe News ten

years ago. She was the quintessential reporter who had got a gift of the gab as well as an unparalleled courage – talents that propelled her to great heights in her career. She would often venture out into unknown territories all alone for news stories and return unscathed. Her good looks didn't hurt either. She was tall, had a bright, confident-looking face and a charming nature, which made her a 'natural' in the TV news business. She was soon spotted by the best in the business. She chose the opportunity to work with Century News because it was owned by the illustrious business *Mogul* Anwar Shah, whom she used to admire a lot.

Prakash was never sure how Seema felt about him. He was a guy with average looks, notwithstanding his fancy hair, which often appealed to the opposite sex. But barring the last few weeks, he knew he looked much better nowadays in his post-thirties than he ever looked in his life.

Still, he didn't expect this relationship to grow beyond friendship. Seema was married. To be more correct, she was widowed. She had lost her husband a few years ago in a fog-related car accident. Though she was not in the car, invisible wounds from that incident probably haunted her till now. He recalled how she had gone into acute depression and cut herself off from the world after the tragedy. He was glad he could emotionally support her during her dark days. *Just like she did in mine.*

"So, how is Vidisha?" he asked her. Vidisha was her six year old daughter.

"She's good. Learning to sing nowadays."

"Like mother, like daughter," Prakash teased. "What happened to your singing Seema? You also used to be a great singer."

"That was years ago. I swear you'll hate my voice today," she said with a forced smile. "Dad wanted me to become a journalist. So I became one."

Prakash perceived a hint of pain in her voice. "What do you want Vidisha to become?"

"A singer maybe, who knows. She'll tell me one day."

"Not a journalist?" Prakash asked with a smile.

Seema shook her head with a smile and said, "It's a tough life."

"Tell me about it," Prakash replied with a wink.

The noise level of the crowd surged up by a few decibels, catching their attention. A police convoy had just entered through the gates.

"So, it begins," Seema said and rushed towards her cameraman.

Prakash was surprised to see the security arrangements used to bring in Nitin Tomar. The convoy comprised of three vehicles, the first and the last of which were police jeeps. The middle one was a minibus with mesh grills in place of windows. *This jerk is being brought in like a national threat!*

As soon as the convoy stopped inside the court premises, a group of reserve policemen ran towards it to create a perimeter between them and the angry crowd. Rapid action force was on high alert. The fire-brigade started readying its water cannon.

Every reporter in the huddle was now rushing towards the convoy. Prakash felt the journalist inside him wake up. "Let's go," he said to Dilip and got into the crowd surrounding the mini-bus.

After a few moments of jostling and elbowing with spectators and other reporters, Prakash and Dilip managed to secure a spot about ten feet from the bus.

Prakash concentrated hard on the window mesh to get a glimpse of the people sitting inside. It was all dark. "Can you see Nitin?" he asked Dilip, who was busy focusing his camera.

"I can see a person sitting with a black-mask covering his head till the throat. That must be him," Dilip said, looking at his camera screen. He was almost standing on his toes.

"Shit! I wanted to take a look at the man's face," Prakash grumbled. "You sure he looks human?"

"Only a human being is capable of such brutality," Dilip replied with a smile. "He's coming out," he added, alerting Prakash.

Prakash could feel a tense murmur in the crowd as Nitin Tomar came out of the mini-bus. His hands were cuffed behind his back and as Dilip had mentioned, his head masked with black cloth.

When the police started taking him towards the court, a group of youths started shouting 'Death to Nitin! Death to Nitin!' In a few seconds, the whole crowd joined in, their words echoing with rage.

Prakash sensed that the crowd was drifting towards Nitin. He felt an imminent danger. Just one stone pelted by somebody from the crowd would have resulted in the mob going berserk.

"Let's move away from this crowd," he whispered to Dilip. "I am not getting good vibes about this."

Dilip nodded and they started moving backwards, away from the

direction the crowd was drifting. His eyes never strayed from the camera as they walked.

“Look at that,” Prakash screamed, pointing towards a man who burst out of the crowd like a piece of popcorn and charged at Nitin. Three more people did the same. The policemen on the perimeter lashed out at the aggressors with their sticks. It was all mayhem in a few seconds, with people running helter-skelter.

A bunch of policemen started moving Nitin at a rapid pace. They were running towards the court entrance, under the flimsy protection of the police perimeter.

It was the first time Prakash paid attention to the massive, white-coloured court building. It went up five floors. Being newly constructed, its outer walls were glowing in the sun like white-hot sheets of iron. He was standing about twenty meters from the building. From his place, the structure gave him the feel of a multi-level parking lot, with staircases crisscrossing the façade and open corridors running parallel on every floor.

“So, that’s it,” Dilip muttered, relieving his shoulder of the heavy camera. “He’s gone and we are done.”

“How good is your footage?” Prakash asked, drumming his fingers over the camera.

“Not good at all. Thanks to the unruly crowd, I only have a hazy and shaky shot of Nitin getting inside the court building.”

“No close-ups?”

“Nope.” Dilip shook his head. “I guess we will have to make do by interviewing a few protestors,” he said. “Most of the reporters are doing the same.”

Prakash thought for a minute. He wanted to do something better than chasing protestors for sound bites. He turned his eyes towards the court building, looking at people walking on the open corridors. He had an idea.

“Do you know which floor will the hearing take place?” he asked Dilip.

“Second floor, I think.”

“So Nitin will soon walk across the second floor corridor. Won’t he?”

“Only if they use the stairs and not a lift.”

“There are at least ten armed policemen accompanying Nitin. I doubt they would suffocate themselves in a lift.”

“So what do you want me to do? Record while Nitin walks across the

corridor?”

“Yes. Do you remember the landmark photograph of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre?

Dilip frowned. “I.... think I know. The photo showed a Palestinian terrorist wearing a black mask and looking down from the balcony, isn’t it? It was a scary image.”

“Yes! How about taking such a photo?”

Dilip pondered over his point for a moment and then said, “Even if you’re wrong and Nitin doesn’t walk across the corridor, there’s no harm in trying.” He raised the camera up his shoulder again. “We will have to move to the back to get a full view of the second floor.”

Prakash followed him as he walked backwards. They stopped at a point about 50 meters away from the building.

It had been a couple of minutes since Nitin and his captors had entered the court building. Prakash had a hunch that they would cross the corridor on the second floor in a few moments.

“Ready!” Prakash whispered. “They should be on your screen in seconds.”

After a few tense moments of waiting, Dilip raved, “We got our man! ... Buddy, you are getting back your old form.”

But Prakash still had to wait for five seconds or so before he could see Nitin’s moving figure crossing the corridor. A group of policemen were herding him towards the courtroom with unusual urgency. In a few moments, the sociopath would have vanished from his view to face retribution for his crime.

But that was not to be.

Something terrible happened the very next moment. Nitin’s head burst like a water balloon, his body collapsing on the floor and disappearing from Prakash’s view. *Holy shit!* Just half a second later, a loud boom, like the sound of a firecracker, reached the reporter’s ears.

His heart started thumping furiously. In a second, he realized what had just happened. Nitin had been shot by someone. A sniper, was it a sniper? *Oh my God!*

He ducked instinctively. It was Banka, all over again. Around him, people were crouching and kneeling all over the ground, gripping their heads in their hands.

Dilip, also on all fours, whispered with a shaky voice, “It... it came from that building.” He was pointing at an eleven-storied apartment about a kilometre away. There was no other building in the vicinity.

After a few of minutes of standing dazed, the policemen started rushing towards the apartment building. Journalists followed suit, to cover what was going to be one hell of a breaking story.

Prakash first hesitated. But his reporter’s instincts got the better of him. He too ran towards the apartment. He reached it in ten minutes and found all the reporters standing outside the gate. None of them had been allowed entry into the building premises. A police sub-inspector and two constables had taken guard at the gate.

He stood near the gate and looked at the large signage at the top of the building. *Destiny Towers. Couldn’t have been named better.*

As planned, it took only thirty seconds for him to dis-assemble the rifle, run towards the lift shaft and climb on top of the lift. It was a dark cramped space surrounded by metal wires and pulleys. There was an unsettling smell of grease and petroleum in the damp air. But, he could live with it for a few hours. He took off his microphone and earpiece and kept it in his pockets. He had already placed his gun beside himself. He pulled out his mobile phone and typed a message – One loose end tied. One more to go.

2:35 PM, HOTEL RITZ PLAZA, ALLAHABAD

Prakash's mobile started ringing as soon as he entered his hotel room. It was Ritesh Pandey, his boss.

"You have come out with all guns blazing, Prakash," Ritesh said with excitement. "This is a sensational video you guys have made. DK is ecstatic. He has asked for a broadcast at 3.30 today."

DK was the nickname for Dinesh Kamat, the Chief Editor at Globe News. He was a hard-ass bastard who never failed to split hairs over anything Prakash ever churned out.

"3.30! That's just an hour away. Didn't marketing ask for some more lead time?" Prakash said.

"You know DK, right? When he says 3.30, it means 3.30. Our competitors will be caught napping."

"Why? Don't they have footage similar to ours?"

"No way!" his boss said with delight. "Just turn on your TV and see. None of the news channels have captured what you guys have. Only the Times is showing a video of Nitin Tomar being shot. But their footage is shaky, grainy and taken from an odd angle. I think they got it from an onlooker who got lucky and recorded it on his phone camera. In comparison, your footage is like the Mona Lisa."

"Thanks. But to be honest, I am a bit shaken," Prakash said. "I mean, just look at the audacity of this assassin. He... if we think it's a 'he'... killed Nitin Tomar in front of at least a hundred people, which consisted of the

police, the RAF, the media and the Judiciary.”

“Hmmm. I heard he took the shot from an apartment building. How did he manage to flee?”

“Through the sewer lines, I guess,” he replied. “The police found an open manhole in the basement parking area of the building. It leads to many places in the vicinity, including a park.”

“That’s a well-planned killing, then.”

“Hmmm. Must have got balls of steel to pull off an attack like that.”

Ritesh deliberated for a moment and then said, “So, what do you want to do now? Pursue this story further?”

“Yeah. I want to work on this story.”

“OK, then. Carry on. You have always found your own story to work on.”

A few seconds of uncomfortable silence followed.

“Prakash?”

“Yes?”

“I can understand that today must have been tough for you. You come after a break and run into this shooting thing. Hope you are coping well... Just ignore whatever happened in the past.”

“I’m trying.”

“Let me know if you need any help at any point of time. If you even need further time off, I can arrange paid leaves for you.”

“That won’t be necessary. Thanks,” Prakash said and hung up. Now that he was back into his world, there was no point in sulking.

Coming from the hot sun and the mayhem, he felt tired. His eyelids felt a bit heavy, but he warded off the sleepiness by shaking his head. He took out a Red Bull from the mini-bar, finished it off in a few gulps and began to rewind the whole incident in his mind.

He didn’t feel sad for Nitin. The ruthless murderer had got his share of justice. What worried him was the way he was killed. It was scary how an assassin could gun down a moving target in broad daylight with such ease, that too from a distance of more than a kilometre. The shot was taken within seconds of Nitin’s appearance on the corridor. There was the usual hot summer breeze blowing outside, making things difficult. Even from an amateur’s judgment, it was an exceptional kill. The sniper was an ace predator, a virtuoso, who did his job in a fraction of a second, then wrapped up his things and vanished. It was way too fast. *Who was this guy? Who had*

sent him?

What puzzled him more was why would they kill a guy who was anyway on his way to the gallows? Nitin would have got a death sentence nine out of ten times. Life imprisonment was only a remote possibility. So, why take a chance and kill him amid high security? *To make a political statement?*

Dilip had told him about a few death threats issued to Nitin Tomar. The man's act had earned him the wrath of a couple of extremist organizations. One of them was Hind Shakti Sangh, a group of hardliner Hindus, who were in the news quite often for small time activities such as ransacking offices of public institutions, stopping trains and burning buses. They had been known to issue threats, but were never involved in any casualties.

The second one was Mujahid-e-Bashariyat, an outfit Prakash had never heard of. "Warriors for Humanity" – its name meant. They had sent a threat video to a national daily, in which a masked man carrying an AK-47 was reading out a death sentence for Nitin. They declared Nitin a Hindu terrorist who deserved death as punishment. Not through this Hindu nation's courts, but from God's court.

None of these threats looked serious to Prakash. He knew of many outfits who issued frivolous threats as a part of their propaganda. But this case was different. Someone had actually gone out of their way to deliver justice to Nitin. *Was it for justice or was there some hidden agenda?*

He sat on his bed and turned on the TV.

'... Iran's threat to Israel comes at a time when the relations between the two countries are at a historical low. Despite denials by the Israeli Prime Minister, it is widely believed that the Stuxnet computer virus was engineered by Israel and the US to sabotage Iran's nuclear programs. Iran has also blamed Israel for the assassinations of its nuclear scientists over the years. The official word...'

Typical Middle-eastern mudslinging. He flipped through the channels. Something struck him and he went back to a previous news channel.

'... first major attack by this extremist Islamic outfit. No information is available on the origin and the leadership of Mujahid-e-Bashariyat...'

What the hell? His eyes moved onto the red ticker moving at the bottom of the TV screen. One of the news pieces read – 'Breaking News: Mujahid-e-Bashariyat claims responsibility for Nitin's murder.'

So, Mujahid-e-Bashariyat has taken responsibility for Nitin's murder.

That's pretty fast. Who are these people?

He felt a gradual surge of excitement in his body. The Nitin Tomar case was no longer a run-of-the-mill murder trial story. It had turned an interesting corner and it needed to be investigated. He knew whom to reach out to.

Mrinal Dutta.

The man looked not one bit different from the other people traveling in the bus. His sleepy eyes and unshaven face suggested of a man who had been traveling for a couple of days. He would often doze off when the bus glided over plain roads. He no longer thought himself as the same professional he was a decade back. *I am ageing. So it actually happens!*

His name was Raman. At least that's what his bosses called him. His actual name was lost somewhere in the numerous aliases he had used in a life spent doing black ops. His Allahabad job was one of his last ones, he hoped. He was touching fifty and it was time to use his savings to buy a house in some unknown corner of the world and vanish. He wanted to marry, and maybe have children.

But, a lifetime of murders had sullied his dreams. In his sleep, he would often see himself running scared, trying to evade a masked pursuer carrying an HK417, a beast of a rifle stolen from his secret cabinet. No matter how fast he ran, the assailant always managed to corner him. Like a soldier rendered immobile in the battlefield and bereft of any hope, he would lie back on the ground looking into eyes of the enemy. Scary, emotionless eyes with no trace of any hesitation or remorse, with a soul long dead. *Who are you? I have seen your eyes. I... I know you.* As a burst of light emanates from the muzzle of the gun, he would wake up, finding himself drenched in sweat.

No, this had to change. He wanted to dream of women. Of lush green meadows and horses. Of beaches.

He sighed.

This might be possible to achieve, but only if he completed his final assignment successfully. He wished it would be as easy as his Allahabad hit, which had been a routine job for him. His source had already placed his weapons kit on the roof of the apartment building. Hidden inside a torn cardboard carton. All he had to do was assemble the rifle, fire and take it apart.

There was no rush of adrenaline. No feeling of pride in his achievement. The range was not the most challenging for him. His best to date had been a 1.7 kilometre hit in North Waziristan in Pakistan. But still, hitting a target from more than a kilometre away was not a usual occurrence in the sniper fraternity. How many? Maybe a few dozen in the whole country had that capability.

His escape was also a simple affair. As per the plan, the hatch door inside the elevator was kept open by his source. After climbing on top of the elevator car, he had remained hidden there for about half a day. The decoy of moving the manhole cover while entering the building, had worked perfectly as planned. *Policemen are so predictable.* When the panic had subsided, he came out of the building wearing a “Press” tag and ID supplied by his accomplice. He had left the Barrett M107 long range rifle and ammo above the lift, to be picked up by his accomplice.

He looked out the window and caught an eyeful of lush greenery in the valleys below. *Ambala is only a few hours away.*

He felt surprised at how things from the past begin to surface in the mind once we have so much time at hand and nothing to do.

Memories from his training days in the army came into his mind, making his lips curl into a smile. He had begun his career as a naïve wannabe soldier from Laporiya, a small Rajasthani village. A drill sergeant had once meted out severe punishments to him for refusing to charge like a zombie on his command. You will be the first one to get killed in a war, the man had said. But he couldn't help it. He wanted to think and plan carefully before going for the kill. That was not a desirable trait for a foot soldier.

Many years later, he had felt sad to hear that the sergeant had been killed in the Kargil war. *But I did outlive you, sergeant.*

Over time, his amazing marksmanship skills earned him a reputation in his regiment. He was happy there. He got time to strategize and plan before

hitting a target hundreds of meters away. Just when he was dreaming of a long career in the army, a minor felony earned him a court martial. *Bloody sons-of-bitches*. He had sold off a couple of 9 mm pistols bought from the Central Ordnance Depot at Jabalpur to some shady civilians. A lot of army guys did it – buying non-service pattern weapons at dirt cheap rates from the ordnance factories and then selling them in the black market at higher rates. The punishment, if caught red-handed, was reasonable compared to the profits people like him made. Unfortunately, in his case, the bosses decided to create an example of him. He got a rigorous jail term and lost all claims to his pension corpus. He had suspected it all along, but the feeling came to surface only on the day of his sentencing. That the army was not the place for him. There was no respect for real talent. *Bunch of losers*.

He looked out again. The bus had entered Ambala city. *So, the next phase begins.*

Prakash wrung his shirt collar and watched his sweat drip down to the stairs he was climbing. *Hmmph!* The lift of the apartment building was not working due to a power cut in the area. It was only 10 o'clock in the morning and the temperature outside was touching 43 degrees. He looked up. He had only crossed the 2nd floor. *Holy shit! 3 more floors to go.* The tingling pain in his right knee was not helping matters. On top of that, the sniper incident had taken away another night's sleep. He wondered when his problems would end. *I will implode with pain someday.*

He was in the building to personally investigate. And he was free to do so because he had outsourced the research on *Mujahid-e-Bashariyat* yesterday to Mrinal Dutta, a brilliant researcher and investigator hired by Globe News from time to time. This guy used to be an overachieving equity analyst at a stock-trading firm. His analyses were sought after by numerous news channels and business newspapers. His downfall was quite unexpected and unexplained. He never told anybody what happened, but one fine day he said goodbye to the industry forever. He went dark for a few years, until he was found by Ritesh Pandey.

Ritesh knew what a talent Mrinal exactly was. His research and investigation skills were unparalleled. He just needed to apply them in a new area – journalism. Mrinal soon resurfaced in the world as a freelance researcher. And he was awesome in his new avatar.

It didn't take Prakash long to learn that once, Mrinal was given any task ,

he could relax and wait for the genius to come back and surprise him with some shocking disclosures.

Prakash was panting with thirst and exhaustion when he reached the fifth floor. He speculated whether taking this mortal risk of climbing the stairs would lead to any positive results. He had come to visit Vidya Tomar, Nitin's ex-wife. It was an unplanned visit. He located Flat No. 508 and studied the nameplate. *Ms. Vidya Narayan. No 'Tomar' in her surname. Interesting.*

He pressed the calling bell and looked around. Her building had a clear view of the traffic on Vivekananda Marg.

The door was opened by a stern looking lady in a nightie. She was shorter than him and had a face that might have been beautiful once. Today, it looked like a deserted garden, as if all life had gone out of it. He placed her in her early thirties.

"Are you from the media?" she asked in a strict tone.

Prakash was ready with a well-rehearsed answer. "No madam. I am a psychologist."

She frowned; looking undecided whether to shut the door on his face or not.

This was the moment he was looking to pounce on. "After the unfortunate event related to your husband... sorry ex-husband, the government is exploring options to set-up a counselling wing for teachers," he said, trying to sound compassionate. "You know, quite a substantial amount of children's lives are impacted by their teachers. So, there is a need for such an institution to ensure that teachers impart only quality education to the children. They should not use the classrooms to vent out their personal anger".

Will she be able to catch my bluff, he wondered. Reporters would have hounded her since the day her husband committed those murders. He ran the risk of being thrown off the 5th floor if he said he was from the media. That's why he had decided to use this 'innovative' hook of a psychologist.

She remained silent. Pondering over this new intervention in her life.

Please. Please. Please. Please. These were the only words running in Prakash's mind.

"What do you want?" she replied after the hiatus, opening her door a bit wider to let him in.

She did not ask for any identity card. *Thank God.*

"Just a few questions," Prakash said as he got in. "I can understand what

you must be going through. I am sorry for that.”

He sat on the sofa. The living room looked ornate for a teacher’s wife.
She must have a good job.

He looked at her, expecting her to ask if he needed some water. But her blank face showed no such intention. *Ask your questions and fuck off! That’s what she wants.*

“Was your ex-husband suffering from any mental or psychological disorder?” Prakash began.

“He was pretty depressed with his life. His bigger ambitions had come to naught, in his opinion. The fact that I had a better paying job had hurt his male ego. He wanted to be the sole bread winner in our house.”

“Was that the reason for your divorce?” Prakash asked, and then added a few words of caution, “I am sorry if I am being personal.”

“No. That’s OK. I am used to these questions now,” she replied.
“Actually, we had a lot of fights over the same issues for the last one and half years. Six months ago, I decided enough was enough.”

“Did he ever harm you or your daughter physically in any manner?”

“No. Rinku was his life. He would never hit her.”

“What about you? Did he ever raise a hand on you?”

“No,” she replied with a faint irritation in her voice.

Tread carefully boy!

“From whatever happened in your house in these one and a half years, did you ever get any hint that Nitin was about to be so violent?”

“Never.” She had tears in her eyes. “In fact, he had started to cope up with his life after our divorce. He had even taken Rinku for a ride on his scooter once. Both of them looked so happy.”

“This was how many days before the Geetanjali school massacre?”

“A week ago.”

Prakash was surprised. If Nitin was happy and positive just one week before the murders, how did he turn into a monster on that fateful day?

“You did not find anything unnatural about his behaviour when he took your daughter out, did you?”

“No. He looked like the old Nitin I had married.” Tears started flowing from her eyes.

“Was he seeing a doctor? Any psychiatrist?”

“No. I had advised him once and that had led to a big argument between

us.”

“So, Vidyaji, how did Nitin become such a cold-blooded murderer?”

“I have no idea.” She started sobbing. “I never knew I had married such a monster.”

“I am so sorry,” Prakash said, consoling her. This meeting was going nowhere. He had expected to find some negative traits like violent anger and rage in Nitin’s history. To his surprise, there was no such thing. It was as if Nitin had suddenly become a wild animal on the 3rd of March. *What the hell happened to Nitin on that day?*

He tried to think of any other question to ask, but none came to his mind.

“OK, madam. Thanks a lot for your help. Our intention is only to find out patterns in behaviour through which we can identify in advance, teachers who need our help and counselling. Before it goes too far.”

“I can understand.”

“If there is anything else which you think can help us in our research, it would be of great help,” Prakash said, while standing up and walking towards the door.

“I cannot think of anything as of now.”

He shrugged. “Thank you then, Vidyaji.”

He took a few steps towards the staircase and then stopped mid stride. *Did I hear an ‘excuse me’?* He turned around. She was calling him. He rushed again to the door like an excited puppy.

“Well, there might be something which may help you. A couple of days before 3rd of March, I had received a call from some clinic. The person on the other side was asking for Nitin. He said that Nitin had given them two numbers and the first one was switched off.”

“So, did you ask who this person was?”

“He gave me the name of some clinic on Chaddha Road. I don’t remember the exact name. Nitin must have given my number by mistake.”

“Can I have the phone number of that person please?”

“Yes. Give me 10 minutes.”

Prakash tried the mobile number for the second time. Same result. The mobile was switched off.

Vidya had fished out three possible numbers from her calls list in the post-paid bill for that month. She had saved and organized all the bills in her laptop, just in case the police ask. The whole process of sifting had taken more than half an hour. *All waste now.*

Of the three numbers, one belonged to a garment shop and another belonged to a bank's telemarketing department. The third one was switched off.

He checked his watch. It was 11:55 AM. *Too early to hit a dead end. Mrinal, come to my help again.*

He called up Mrinal. He knew he would have to dial a couple of times before anyone picked up the phone.

"Wake up buddy. It's afternoon already!" Prakash said, in response to the sleepy "hello" from Mrinal.

"I am still looking for the dog which bit me and I became a freelancer," he mumbled. "A man who sleeps at 4 AM doing your job deserves some sympathy. Doesn't he?"

"My condolences," Prakash said with a giggle. "So, you have any good news for me?"

"Yeah..." Mrinal said, yawning. "Good news is that I have sent you everything in a mail. Now can I request you to allow this man some sleep?" He was just about to hang up and doze off again, when his eyes opened in response to the loud voice coming from the mobile.

"WAIT, WAIT, WAIT! I need your help with something else!"

"Now what?"

"I have a phone number which is switched off at the moment. I want all the details of its subscriber."

"Fuck off man. Why don't you try your own intel team at Globe?"

"Nobody can give me a faster response than you. You are the best."

"No buttering please. I have high cholesterol. Tell me the number."

Prakash told him. *I know you have written it on your bed sheet.*

"Besides this, I am giving you another number. This is Nitin Tomar's number," Prakash said.

"The fucker who got fucked back?" Mrinal asked.

"Yup. You nailed it," Prakash replied. "I want you to find out if any communication happened between these two numbers, especially around 3rd March. Get me the timings and location coordinates for those calls also."

“I am going to charge you overtime.”

“I thought people usually charge overtime for working late nights,”
Prakash said with a grin.

“Why do you care?” he said. “It’s your channel that will pay.”

“Someday I am going to do a story on a swindler researchers like you.”

“And I will repay the debt by posting your sexcapades online.”

Prakash laughed. “OK. OK. Let’s be serious now. When am I getting my results?”

“I’ll sleep for an hour. Then I’ll do your job. And then, I’ll sleep some more,” Mrinal replied and hung up.

Prakash knew his friend would do the job in an hour. The guy worked superfast., God knows how. It was a secret how he managed to dig out so much confidential information about almost everything. Either the bugger had influential friends in telecom companies or he was a genius hacker.

With nothing else to do till Mrinal called back, Prakash decided to refuel himself at a nearby McDonalds. As he dug into his burger, he felt an awareness blooming inside him; a realization which he could no longer ignore – that he actually loved his job. It was hard for him to accept this at first, because of the trauma he had lived through. But with every passing moment he felt naturalized to it. What could he have been other than a journalist? *A salesman? No. A desk jockey? No.* Maybe, he was only meant to be a news hunter.

He remembered how he had started off as a fledgling reporter about twelve years ago. With no job at the end of his studies, he had to get into a small-time crime magazine which published true crime and sleazy stories. While his friends basked in the glory of more respectable jobs, he roamed around New Delhi's underbelly chasing sex and murder stories. The average reader of his magazine wanted to peep into the bedrooms, penthouses and rave parties of 'high class society'. Prakash gave them that and more. He became their angel, whetting their fantasies through *masala* filled tales of crimes of lust, passion, betrayals and adultery.

Without a doubt, it was a diversion from where he wanted to be in the world of journalism. But, he had no option. He needed the money to survive on his own. To become his own saviour. There was no family to go to. At least, that's what he reminded himself of every morning. A long time ago, his father had left his cancer afflicted mother for a brand new wife. He could

never forgive the man for so easily deserting a woman counting her last few breaths. After his mother's death, his father brought him to his new home. Was it because of pity or a haunting sense of responsibility, he still wondered. But he could not bear the thought of living under the same roof with a woman he had cursed ever since his father had chosen her over his mother. He joined a boarding school, never to come back to his father's home again. His education thereafter was paid in part through his scholarships and his mother's savings, and then through unwanted contributions from his father.

Though his first job didn't make his purse bulge, it did teach him a thing or two about the tough bitch journalism was. You could not survive this profession without a strong network of contacts in the media, the police, the political circles and then in the city's sewers. More often than not, relationships with gamblers, document forgers, police informers, waiters and errand boys created the difference between a lukewarm and a sensational story.

He built his own network travelling across the city on his second-hand scooter, having booze and *chai-sutta* with the shadiest of characters. To his dismay, he found admirers of his sleazy writing at the unlikeliest places. With time, his gang of 'Baker Street Irregulars' became more and more efficient, giving him constant eyes on the street and new leads to pursue. Soon, Globe News spotted this talent in him and offered him a job that went on to create a star of him. Perhaps he had taken that freedom to dangerous heights, which led to his downfall.

His phone started ringing. It was Mrinal.

"This is quick, bro," Prakash said.

"Yeah. I got some good info. Have sent you an email."

"I can't check mails here. Why don't you tell me on phone?"

"You can't be serious. You want all this verbally, while we talk?"

"Yeah. I can't help it. I need the info now."

"OK," Mrinal sighed. "The man you are looking for is Varun Gupta. There have been six phone calls between Varun and Nitin – all within seven days of the massacre. Nitin's location has changed for every call, but for Varun, all the calls have been made from Kishore Plaza on Chaddha Road."

Bingo.

"Did you get hands on his address?"

“Yeah. But I have a feeling that it’s fake. The landmarks seem odd.”

“Fake?” Prakash said with surprise. “Why would the man fake his address?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that there is no such place in Allahabad.”

“OK, then. I am leaving for Kishore Plaza right now. Let’s hope I find this Varun Gupta there,” he said before hanging up.

Prakash took an auto-rickshaw for Chaddha Road. He asked a few people on the way for directions and reached Kishore Plaza in half an hour. It was a two-storied market complex with about 20-30 small shops. Prakash rapidly read their names – *Indus Garments, Leena Beauty Parlour, Tejas Fashions...*

He went into the nearest shop on the ground floor. It was named Azam Stock Brokers.

“Yes Sir?” a middle-aged man asked him.

“I am looking for a guy called Varun Gupta. He probably works in some clinic nearby.”

“The only clinic nearby is a kilometre away. Aayush Eye Clinic”

It can’t be. 1 kilometre is too far away.

“Maybe he doesn’t work in a clinic. But do you know any guy named Varun Gupta?”

The man shook his head. “I think you should check with the owner of this plaza. His office is upstairs.”

Prakash went upstairs into a small office with a glass door. An old man was sitting on the chair in front of a desk. There were many thick files and receipt books on a rack behind the man. An old, crumpled issue of ‘Sex and Crime’ magazine was lying on his table. One of the subheadings on its cover read ‘Husband swapping – the new pastime of Alpha Women’.

He moved his eyes away. The article was written by him and he recalled it carried his photograph as well. It would be the height of embarrassment if the old man recognised him. He hemmed and hawed, and posed his query to the old man. Thankfully, the old man didn’t pay much attention to his face. Had it been the Hindi edition of the magazine (with the name Sex and Crime written on the cover in Devanagari script and blood splatter font), his photograph would have been on the front page– too conspicuous to ignore.

“Dr. Varun Gupta had started a psychiatry clinic in our plaza few months ago,” the old man said, poring over the pages of a thick binder. “His business didn’t take off well here. So, he shifted his shop in two months. But why are

you asking about him?”

“Actually one of my friends was under his care. I wanted to consult him for a personal issue. Can I have his contact details, if you have?” Prakash asked, lying through his teeth.

“Yes. We always keep the address details of our tenants. Wait a minute.”

The old man turned a couple of pages, let out a breath and looked up.

“Write down the address.”

Brilliant.

Oriental Breeze is one of the best restaurants in Allahabad, frequented only by the elite. It is built like a dimly lit bamboo forest with a stream passing through it, and wooden tables in different alcoves. The parking lot of the restaurant would often be filled with Mercs and BMWs. But it was filled below capacity today.

Seema Sharma was still wondering why sub-inspector Jagan Pandey wanted to meet at such an expensive place. In and around Allahabad, the man was a valuable source of news for her channel. He had given Century News quite a few scoops and exclusives in the past. So, even if the fucker chose a five-star restaurant for common chitchat, the channel didn't mind. She didn't mind either as long as he wasn't wasting her time. There was no such luck today, because he seemed intent to be wasting her time as well as spoiling her mood.

"I have never seen an ordinary man getting killed in this fashion. Don't know what's happening to this country," Jagan said, stuffing a seven hundred buck chicken lollipop into his mouth. "If killers like these start poking their nose in justice delivery, I think we'll soon become redundant."

"So, you think it's an open and shut case. Nitin commits a horrific crime and some 'vigilante' group takes him out, using a top-notch assassin. That's hilariously simple," she scoffed, making evident the irony in her statement.

She expected more than this rubbish from an 'inside source' in Allahabad Police. It had always been a give and take relationship between the police and

the media. But in this case, it seemed to be one-way traffic. He had been tipped off multiple times by Century News journos about shit coming his way and clues his team had missed during their investigations. But in return, there was not much her channel was getting. *Same shitty information that every news channel gets, not even with an internal source!*

Jagan wiped the masala sticking to his goatee. Chewing between his words, he said, "I am sad to say that the truth is what it seems to be. There is hardly any internal story. Mujahid-e-Bashariyat has taken the responsibility for this attack. I guess they have a class sharpshooter in their ranks. Police is looking for the whereabouts of this outfit. No clues yet."

"What about the ballistics report?"

"Detailed report is yet to come. The primary analysis points to a .50 BMG bullet, commonly used by snipers around the world. It was fired from the roof of Destiny Towers at a distance of about 1086 meters. The best kill in the world till date has been around 2.5 kilometers in the Afghan war."

"That doesn't help much. Any clues... scratch marks?"

"We found a few scratch marks on the roof where he placed the rifle barrel and tripod. But, I can say with confidence that we are not going to get much from that."

"But aren't sniper rifles long? How come nobody noticed him entering and leaving the building with such a weapon or kit in his hands?"

"To add, the kit would be very heavy too," Jagan said, nodding. "Only the security guard at the apartment can answer this question. Alas, he doesn't remember much because the killer had tranquilized him."

Give me something, damnit. "What about a possibility that the weapon was already in the building... and that someone living in or commonly known around the apartment might be involved?"

"It's quite possible. But let me be very frank with you. Powers above me want this case to be closed. Nitin was a monster who deserved to get killed. And people are happy that he's gone. A lot of government money is saved. There are other burning issues this country is facing where our manpower is needed. So, I don't think you will find any eye-opening disclosures from police in this case."

"Then why the hell are we wasting each other's time at such an expensive restaurant. We could have met for tea on the street outside. I thought you had called me to give me some juicy info off the record."

She dug her fingernails into her palms. Was there going to be any revelation in this case at all? *Bloody Indian police. Do we have the largest number of unsolved cases in the world?*

“I have called you for something else. And it is off the record. We are not going to work on this case for more than two or three days. Don’t take us seriously, if we look busy on this case. Because we aren’t. It’s a show we are putting up in front of the courts and the media. So, let me tell you one thing. And this will be the last thing I am going to tell you about this case. If you come to me tomorrow and ask for further info, I will not be able to help you. OK?”

“OK. Carry on.”

“Just to get a grip on Nitin Tomar’s personality, we wanted to know who his friends were... who he talked to... what he talked about and all that. So, I brought in a guy from our cyber investigation cell. This guy was able to get into his Gmail and Facebook accounts.”

“And did you find anything useful?”

“I am not sure. We couldn’t infer much from his Facebook account. He was a pretty offline kind of person. Then we checked his Gmail account. Here, too, his “Inbox” and “Sent Mails” folders did not contain anything of interest. But we found a couple of peculiar mails in his “Junk” folder. He had never read them because the mails never came to his Inbox. Both of the mails consisted of one line each and were sent from a weird looking email ID. Maybe, that’s why they went into the junk folder as spam.”

“And what were those lines?” Seema asked. *Cut the crap. Come to the point.*

“The first mail was sent about five days before the killings. It said, ‘You are in danger. Reply and we can talk.’ The subject line was simply ‘Hiii’. The second mail came only one day before the killings with the same subject line. It said, ‘Reply immediately. You are in real real danger.’ No mail after the massacre.”

“This is surprising. Did the sender have a name?” Seema frowned. *This is getting interesting.*

“‘Reply Immediately’ – that’s what he had mentioned as his name.”

“Was your cyber guy able to track this email ID?”

“No. He was with me only for a few days. He has been reassigned now.”

“So, what is your take on this?”

“Well, from one angle, these mails can be spam mails. Everybody gets them. I get so many ‘Reply immediately’ mails saying ‘you have won millions of pounds’. They are junk and that’s why they go to the junk folder. But every once in a while some genuine mails also find their way to the folder. . If you ask for my personal opinion, getting such mails so close to the massacre can’t be a coincidence.”

“But the real question is – ‘How are these mails related to what Nitin did?’ Was Nitin in danger, or were the small children in danger from Nitin?”

“That’s why I am telling you all this. I will soon be off this case. From a policeman’s perspective, Nitin has got the punishment, which we would have given him anyway. But, there is a mystery to this case, which is making me uneasy and curious. See if you can get some insights from whatever I have shared with you,” Jagan said, looking straight into Seema’s eyes. He seemed to regret that he had to leave this case unsolved.

He gave a printout to Seema.

“This is the printout of the mails. I have also written the login names and passwords of Nitin’s accounts.”

“Thanks Jaganji. Let me first digest the information you have provided, because it raises a lot of weird questions. For example, ‘Did somebody know that Nitin was about to kill someone?’ or ‘Did someone know that Nitin was about to get killed himself?’ There is a lot of confusion.”

“I agree. And you’ll be surprised to know that I am pretty scared of whoever killed Nitin. Scared to the core,” Jagan said with a grim face, as Seema stood up and started to move.

Just when she had crossed a few tables, he called her name. She turned.

“Be safe, Seema Madam!” he said, glancing at her the same way the inmates look at a fellow prisoner being taken to the gallows. As if the warnings in the mails were intended for her.

Prakash was back in his hotel room and sitting in front of his laptop. He was working in darkness, praying to God for some sleep. The bottle of VAT 69 Scotch whisky on the table glowed in the faint light from the monitor. He'd had his third drink of the night, but was upset about not getting high.

Worsening his mood, the psychiatrist angle had reached a roadblock. The address – '35/2C, Shipra Enclave, Lalpur Avenue, Allahabad' given by the old man had turned out to be a fake one. Nothing on the address matched any landmark in the city. *Who is this Varun Gupta? Why does he have so many fake addresses?*

He tried searching for Dr Varun Gupta on Google. Soon, he was shaking his head in disbelief. There was no information about this man on the internet. All searches with his name threw irrelevant results. *Will Mrinal be able to dig up something about this ghost? God knows!*

Dejected, he made himself another drink and gulped half of it in one shot. His brain was clouding over. *Good.*

Recalling that Mrinal had sent him a few mails, he checked his Outlook mailbox. There were three mails from Mrinal with the same subject – 'Stuff on MeB' *Mujahid-e-Bashariyat*. He downloaded all the attachments into one folder made for the Nitin Tomar case. There were a lot of web pages, a few videos and an MS Word document named 'Synopsis.docx'

From experience, Prakash knew that 'Synopsis' was the most important

document in the folder because it contained the summary of Mrinal's investigation. He opened it and started reading.

Mujahid-e-Bashariyat, meaning "Warriors for Humanity" is a very new organization. Hardly 8 months old.

MeB published their first video on YouTube (video attached) on 12th of September last year i.e. about 6 months before the Geetanjali school massacre. They have also made a few blog entries and posts on militant Islamic websites, all between September to December last year (web pages attached).

The posts in YouTube and other websites are made using different accounts with different names. It is difficult to get the exact details of these users.

I found one person who can be possibly linked to MeB. His name is Mohammed Afroz. He has commented on almost all the posts of MeB and often writes like a moderator. I have tracked him to his locality (see details in point 6).

Nitin Tomar's assassination is the first major activity of MeB. Interestingly, unlike other terror groups, the ideological leader of MeB is not a public figure. No one knows who heads MeB.

Mohammed Afroz lives somewhere near Jalbera Road in Ambala City. Probably works as a Foreman in a local sugar mill. I hacked into his Facebook account and a few radical Islamic forums he is part of. Appears to be pro-Taliban, as 'pro' as they get. He often interacts with a bunch of orthodox Islamic friends who usually discuss and criticize the lifestyle and behaviour of 'Kafirs'.

To summarize, MeB is a fledgling Islamic organization that has shown its teeth for the first time. Go grab this Afroz guy and you may get some more leads.

After he was finished with the synopsis, Prakash quickly went through the other attachments. The video comprised a masked man speaking in Urdu and admonishing the *kafirs* from the west. *Usual stuff. Dozens of such videos on YouTube.* Because the language was pure Urdu, he wasn't able to gather much from it, though he heard the term Mujahid-e-Bashariyat a few times. He found similar stuff in the saved web pages too, which contained blog entries made by people from MeB.

The idea Prakash got from Mrinal's research was that MeB was a pretty

new organization and was still trying to make its name. *Some day or another, its leader would come out in public.*

He was impressed with Mrinal's work. He had not only been able to give him a new lead, but also a place where he could find his man. *Smart work buddy.* He decided to travel to Ambala at the earliest.

He took his glass into the bathroom and drained the remaining VAT 69 in the washbasin. His usual chore would begin now. *Trying to sleep.*

An alley offsetting the Jalbera road lay silent in the duskiess of the summer evening. The lane composed of 2-3 storied small buildings on its either side. With no streetlights and only a few houses with lights turned on, the place looked like a quarantined town afflicted with a pandemic.

It was for the third time in the day that Raman was walking through the alley. His first two visits had been just for reconnaissance purposes. *The real thing will happen now.*

He was a tall man with skin the darkest shade of brown, making him look like a ghost in the night. To make it tougher for anybody to memorize and recall his features in the dark, he had not shaved since the last few days. It gave him a grizzly look. On top of that, he was wearing a cap and photochromic glasses.

He looked at his next victim's house, which stood only a few meters away from him. It was a small flat, a 1-BHK-house maybe, with no stories, a small parking space in front and a metallic grilled gate outside. A motorcycle was parked on the veranda. Lights were on in the living room and the bathroom.

He's in.

He looked around to check if there were any people in the alley. He could see only a couple of guys somewhere far down the lane. That was good. He wanted no eyewitnesses. His escape plan was also well thought out.

Adjoining lanes, the connecting main road and the fastest route for the bus

stand – all were etched clearly in his mind. He unlocked the safety of his Beretta and cocked the hammer. He was now ready for all possible impediments to his escape. If everything went well, which he hoped it would, it would be as easy as his Allahabad hit.

Ensuring that the metal gate didn't rattle and squeak, he opened it, got in and then shut it again. He moved up the veranda and knocked on the door. The ray of light from the peephole in the door was blocked by an eye trying to figure out who was standing outside.

Open the door, kid.

A young man in his late twenties opened the door. He appeared tired and run down, a look accentuated by the stubble on his face. His forehead creased as he gave Raman a questioning glance.

"I thought we were done! Why are you here again?" the young man asked, trying hard to keep his voice to a whisper.

"Let me in first, Afroz," Raman replied with a smirk. "You know we can't talk outside." He could smell the revolting concoction of smoke and drink in his breath.

Afroz let Raman in and shut the door in a hurry.

Raman noticed Afroz was staggering. *Drinking the whole night? Nice.* The TV was turned to some news channel. He saw an ashtray filled with cigarette stubs and ash beside an empty whisky glass. The living room seemed to be clouded in a thin veneer of smoke. *This guy is paranoid. Smoking and drinking too much. Good for me.*

"So, how are things Afroz?" Raman asked, deliberately trying to provoke him.

"Let's keep the pleasantries for some other day," Afroz replied irritably. "We had decided we'd never meet after you made the final payment. So, why are you here? You know it's dangerous."

"I know, I know. But there is a problem," Raman said, increasing the volume of the TV. "I think, over the past few weeks, you have left too many open trails on the Internet. A clever guy just needs to follow one trail and you are gone."

"What the hell! I have taken sufficient care in hiding my footprints on the net," he protested. "We wanted everybody to go after Mujahid-e-Bashariyat and that's what we have achieved. The police and the media are now after this phoney organization, looking for some venom-spewing Jihadi clad in a

pyjama.”

“I know, Afroz. You’ve done well up until now. But, there are things that aren’t sometimes in our control. The threat videos you had prepared can lead investigators to where it was recorded. The pro-Jihad communities you got into can be infiltrated. The AK-47 I had given you can be found. There are a lot of loose ends. So, you need to go.”

“Go?” Afroz frowned. “Where?”

“To Australia. At our cost.”

“And what if I say no?”

“Then you will piss off some really powerful people,” Raman said, staring into his eyes. “Besides, you don’t have an option. We don’t want someone to get to you and then connect you to us. So you will have to go.”

“When do I move?”

“Tomorrow. You go to Mumbai and then fly out.”

Afroz nodded with a sad look on his face.

“By the way, where is the AK-47 now?” Raman asked, changing the topic.

“Taken apart and hidden in the bathroom flush.”

“What if it’s found by someone?”

“Nobody comes here.”

“Just show me where you have kept it.”

“Come with me,” Afroz said with pride, as if he was an artist showing off his creation to someone.

Afroz walked ahead with Raman following him. He walked into his bedroom that had an attached bathroom and went inside.

This was the moment Raman was waiting for. He took out a syringe from his trouser and removed its cap. It contained Etorphine Hydrochloride, a tranquilizer used to control wild animals. *Knocks-off an elephant in a minute.* On humans, the effect could be devastating. He didn’t want to kill Afroz with it. So, he had kept its potency lower on purpose.

He gave the piston a gentle push to remove air from the syringe and opened the bathroom door. Afroz was bent over the commode, trying to open the flush cover.

Raman plunged the syringe into his back near the spinal cord and pushed the piston till almost half of the contents of the syringe were inside his body. Afroz turned around with a start, his eyes bulging in shock. It took only one

second for him to understand what was happening.

“You bast...” he mumbled, but could not complete the sentence. He tried to shout and call for help, but somehow felt no power left in his body. His mind was going blank. Smoke and alcohol were making things worse.

Raman stood in front of Afroz, keenly observing the reaction of the drug. He took out another syringe from his pocket. It contained a white-coloured liquid.

“It is a heavy dose of cocaine,” he said. “Even while dying, you will enjoy the rush.”

Afroz was lying on the ground. His face was blank, but eyes were open and directed towards Raman.

“Accept death, my friend,” the assassin scoffed. “Poets say it’s graceful.”

He bent down and picked up Afroz’s left hand. “You are left handed, aren’t you? You will now inject yourself with some cocaine,” he whispered.

He affixed the syringe between Afroz’s index and middle fingers, and dragged it towards his right arm, inserting the needle into his vein. The young man offered no resistance, as if his bones had turned into loose rubber. Raman now pushed the piston gradually till no more cocaine was left in the syringe. *Go to sleep. Forever.*

He now pulled out a handkerchief from his pants. It contained a packet of cocaine, a couple of crumpled bus tickets and a few needles dabbed in cocaine. He pierced Afroz’s vein once with each needle and then placed the needles in his breast pocket. Holding the cocaine packet using the handkerchief, he went into the kitchen and looked for a jar containing lentils. *Dal*. Taking care not to leave any fingerprints, he opened the jar and embedded the cocaine packet within the dal.

Now he took out the bus ticket and the cocaine dabbed needles and dropped them in the kitchen dustbin. He took out a manila envelope from his jacket and placed it in the bedroom cupboard. The only thing that remained now was wiping his footprints and fingerprints, if any.

Raman now relaxed, because he had covered all his bases. Two days ago, his accomplice had dropped a Barrett M107 rifle in a pond a few kilometers from here. The man had ensured that he was seen by a few people. That was also a part of the game. *Perfect closure to this episode. Can I retire now?*

Prakash lay on the operating table, unable to move. Bathed in the disconcerting glow of the surgical lights, he felt suffocated, as if a wet towel had been wrapped around his face. He tried to shout, but couldn't. *No. Please, don't.* He wanted to plead to the people in masks working on him with scalpels and forceps. *Stop!*

The men didn't stop.

Prakash gave up resisting. He couldn't do anything other than staring at the men's faces. He concentrated on the face of one man, who appeared to be their leader. An old man, with scholarly eyes behind thick lenses, who kept talking to his colleagues in hushed tones. His hands moved with the precision of a sculptor. Crimson red fingers. Spreading open skin. Cutting into flesh.

In a second, the surgeon's facial expression changed. He knitted his brows, as if he found something creepy lying amid the naked blood vessels and organs. A momentary shadow of disbelief crossed his narrowed eyes. In seconds, it transformed into shock and then sheer terror.

"What the hell is this?" the old man cried, his hands extricating something from Prakash's open chest. It looked like a brick of white clay wrapped in duct tape, with a mesh of wires joining its two ends. His colleagues were aghast. They sprang away from the place like houseflies.

"Don't go. Don't go," the surgeon screamed with helplessness, his hands trembling. "At least, tell me how to handle this!"

But, there was no one left to help him, other than a dying soul on his

operating table.

Prakash had given up on himself. He felt a numbness sweeping over his body, his consciousness drifting away. Before his eyes shut, he heard a familiar sound.

Click!

There was a huge explosion. A ball of fire kept spreading till it engulfed him. Then there was silence. Deathly silence.

Prakash was jolted awake. With dazed eyes, he sat shell-shocked for a few moments. His ears were ringing. He touched himself to make sure he was still alive. His body was shaking, with goose bumps all over.

An announcement by the flight attendant made him realize he was sitting in an airplane. 'Please fasten your seat belts. We are soon going to land in New Delhi.'

When are my nightmares going to end?

He took a few deep breaths and then looked at his watch. *4 PM. Another four and half hours to Ambala.* After getting down at New Delhi airport, he was going to take a cab to Ambala. He wanted to visit this city a day earlier, but there were no tickets available. He ruled out that it would be evening by the time he reached Ambala. As per the plan, the local correspondent of Globe News at Ambala was going to help him out.

He had been very uneasy throughout his flight—jiggling his legs and staring out the window into the blue infinity. It was because of a call from Ritesh just before boarding. His boss had told him about a new development in the Nitin Tomar murder mystery. In the early hours of the day, a man named Mohammed Afroz was found dead in his house at Ambala, the same fucking place he was about to visit. Cocaine overdose was a possible cause. The police had found a lot of documents in his house that connected him to Nitin's murder and the outfit Mujahid-e-Bashariyat. They had also found an AK-47 rifle from his house.

Prakash was perplexed. He was immediately scared too. It was as if someone was spying on his thoughts. *Day before yesterday, I come to know about this Afroz guy. And in a day he's dead. Is it a coincidence?*

Ritesh was surprised to know that Prakash was already travelling to Ambala.

"Do you have some inside info, which I am not aware of?"

"It's a bit complicated. I'll explain it to you later."

Prakash was unable to accept that Afroz's death was not a murder. Ritesh had mentioned that as per the primary reports, the man was suspected to be a junkie, who had taken an overdose of cocaine in a drunken stupor. He had been smoking and drinking without restraint since the last few days. The police had also found a stash of cocaine in his kitchen. His dustbin was also littered with used needles containing traces of cocaine and his blood.

Like an invisible splinter on a shirt that keeps irritating the wearer, nagging thoughts kept troubling Prakash's mind. Something very wrong was going on, but he wasn't able to put his finger on 'what exactly'. It was as if someone was trying to tie up all the loose ends in a secretive and professional matter. He would have to weed out that splinter. *Need to visit the police station.*

"I know this man," Ashish Mehra, the local correspondent for Globe News, said. "Let me do the talking when he comes."

Prakash nodded. *I won't mind.*

Both were sitting across the Station House Officer's desk in the Sector-8 police station. It was 8:30 PM and they were waiting for the SHO to return from his dinner break. Prakash looked at the name written on the plaque kept on the desk. *Mohan Kumar Lohiya, Sub-Inspector.*

There was nothing to pass time with. So Prakash decided to strike a conversation with the young chap. He was meeting Ashish for the first time. The kid looked like a bright, impressive man oozing with the same eagerness he used to have many years ago.

"You cover the whole of Haryana?" he asked Ashish.

"I and a few colleagues of mine."

"How long have you been working at Globe News?"

"Two years."

"That's a pretty short period. Seems you have made quite a few friends in the police force."

"Many!" Ashish said, his face lighting up. "I have contacts in Ambala, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Panipat..." He started counting the districts of Haryana on his fingers.

Prakash was amused to see the naivety in the eyes of this rookie.

In the excitement of having found a new friend, Ashish made a funny face and slid his chair close to Prakash's. He whispered into his ears, "Of all the police officers I know, this Lohiya guy is the biggest moron. You would not have seen a bigger publicity hound. He's... shit!" He stopped, turned around and then bit his tongue. His face lost its colour for a second.

What happened? Prakash too, turned his face and found a policeman standing behind him with a cunning smirk. His eyes went towards the name badge stuck on his chest. *Mohan K. Lohiya. So, this is the gentleman Ashish was praising so much. Nice to meet you, Sir.* The sub-inspector looked middle-aged, with a thin moustache and a protruding belly. He was staring at Ashish the way a porn DVD seller stares at a school kid at his counter. The poor guy seemed to have stopped breathing for a moment.

"*Bolo Ashish Bhai!* What do you want to know about the Afroz case?" the sub-inspector said, patting Ashish's back. It sounded more like a slap. "Once in a blue moon our Ambala figures in national news. And look at today. I have given four interviews since morning, you know?"

Ashish heaved a sigh of relief and winked at Prakash. He began with the usual carrot. "*Arey Sahib*, our channel has one of the largest TRPs in North India. When we mention your name in our news bulletin, the world will know."

He introduced Prakash to the sub-inspector, who started speaking straightaway. "Let me summarize the case for you," he began his oft-repeated speech from previous interviews during the day. "As you must be aware, that this Mujahid gang had taken the responsibility of killing Nitin Tomar."

Prakash was amused to hear the word "gang".

"We believe Afroz was the man who shot Nitin dead," the man said.

The words hit Prakash like a jet of cold water. He believed that Afroz would turn out to be a small cog in the wheel called Mujahid-e-Bashariyat. But according to this man, he was the exceptional sniper who blasted Nitin's head from a kilometer.

Mohan continued, "Although Afroz had no criminal history, he was actively supporting Islamic extremism. He seems to be a very disturbed individual, evident from the contents of his laptop. Our team gathered many videos of graphic violence and obnoxious speeches by extremist leaders from his laptop. He also used to write blogs supporting Jihad and Islamic law."

"Just like every other brainwashed terrorist," Ashish said.

“Yeah. He had also hidden an AK-47 in his bathroom,” Mohan said, nodding in agreement. “But the biggest clue which connects Afroz to Nitin Tomar is an envelope found in his cupboard. It contained a few printouts containing news stories related to the Geetanjali school massacre. There was an A4 size photo of Nitin along with a few close-up photographs of the Allahabad court.”

Prakash tried to speak, but was cut short by Mohan. He raised his voice to put forth his point. “Besides, we also found a bus ticket for Delhi-Allahabad in Afroz’s kitchen dustbin. The date of travel was only two days before Nitin’s murder. There was a return ticket also. Same bus. Only the date was a day after the attack,” he said, and took a deep breath of contentment.

“You got all that from his house?” Prakash asked. “Don’t you think it is just plain stupid of him to keep all that evidence at his home? That too when he was supposedly so much in panic that he was smoking and drinking like a fish.”

“You read all that in the newspapers?” Mohan asked.

“I have my own sources.”

“To hell with your source,” he spat. “What’s your point exactly? Someone planted all that evidence in his home and in his laptop? Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t know.” Prakash shrugged. “I am just wondering whether Afroz is just a side-actor or the main actor. How did you arrive at the conclusion that he is the assassin?”

Mohan looked almost offended. “You are an awful cynic Mr Prakash. We are so near in solving this case and you still look unconvinced. No wonder reporters never write anything good about the police,” he complained. The next moment he had a smirk on his face. “But, I have another piece of evidence to take care of doubters like you.”

“Is it the gun found in the pond?” Ashish interjected.

Mohan nodded in response, his smile widening. He wasn’t going to be bullied by condescending reporters.

What the...? Prakash turned his head towards Ashish. He was hearing about this angle for the first time. “Which gun are you talking about?” he asked him. *This guy has not informed me of some other development in this case.*

“Oh... I am really sorry Prakash. As we have met just an hour ago, I

wasn't able to tell you about all this," Ashish replied in an apologetic tone. "Actually, this is a separate incident. Two nights ago..."

Like a desperate co-host in a TV show, Mohan interrupted in between, not letting Ashish take his glory away. "I'll tell you what really happened. But you guys will have to give our police station the credit in your news. Especially the people who deserve it the most," he said, hinting at himself.

He continued, "Actually, a couple of nights ago, some people saw a man throwing an object in the pond near the railway bridge. After hearing about the death of Afroz and all the hue and cry on the news, one man approached us with this information. He said that he wasn't able to have a clear look at the culprit's face in the darkness. He couldn't gather enough courage to confront him either. Now, with so many things happening in Ambala, even such a minor incident could be suspicious. So, we didn't waste a minute. We asked the Division for some scuba divers. Just a few hours ago, the scuba divers found an aluminium case containing a Barrett M107 long range rifle, the one used by snipers."

Good heavens. Is this the same rifle that was used to kill Nitin? Prakash was getting restless.

"I know what you are thinking about Prakash *babu*," Mohan said with an all-knowing smile. "We are also thinking of the same. Not every day you find a costly sniper rifle being thrown down a bridge. That too in Ambala. So I guessed that the rifle must have been used in some big mission recently. I thought it might be the gun used in the Nitin Tomar murder."

Prakash tried to recall the number of times Mohan began his statements with an 'I'. Ashish's observations about the man were turning out to be correct. He was indeed a certified moron.

"Have you done a ballistics test on the gun?" Prakash asked.

"It's with the central forensics team right now. But I strongly believe that the bullet that killed Nitin will match this gun."

"Does Afroz have a history of sharp-shooting? He has to be an ace sniper to carry out a hit like that," Prakash said.

"You will not yield, will you?" Mohan said, shaking his head. "I suggest you go to your hotel room and watch the TV. An hour ago I saw a piece of breaking news on a news channel. It said that Afroz was a good shooter during his NCC days."

"Firing 303 is different from firing an impossible shot from a long range

rifle.”

“That is true. But who knows, this guy could have got picked up by a militant organization and then trained in some fucking Jihadi camp,” Mohan replied, sounding exasperated with the cross-questioning.

But, Prakash was far from convinced. *It’s raining evidence in Ambala. Too easy to believe.*

There was an uncomfortable silence for a minute. It was broken by Ashish. “What about the cocaine? Do you know anyone who deals in cocaine in Ambala?”

“Well, I’d have to say I’m surprised myself. Cocaine is big news in Ambala. Death because of cocaine overdose is a bit too much to digest. But, you know, these terrorists have their own supply networks for everything. They don’t rely on the local peddlers. This guy must have in some real tension and paranoia after committing the crime. He was full of smoke, alcohol and cocaine.”

Clever. Very clever. Prakash couldn’t help admiring the way the perpetrators had gone about their business. A terrorist on drugs was not a rarity. They often opted to get high before carrying out their attacks. It made them less scared and more ruthless. Even Ajmal Kasab and his team of murderers took Amphetamines before they caused the mayhem in Mumbai during the 26/11 attacks.

“When was the last time you came across a terrorist who died of drug overdose?” he asked, aiming the question at the sub-inspector as well as at himself.

“Frankly, I have never seen one. But then I’m also seeing a terrorist for the first time in my life,” Mohan replied with a chuckle

“Did he have craters on his arms... near the veins?” He remembered seeing them on a junkie’s arms in one of his previous cases.

“For what?”

“Well, if you’re an addict, you keep on injecting yourself day-in and day-out. That creates a lot of spots and small craters.”

“I am not sure I saw anything like that.”

They discussed the time and manner of Afroz’s death for a few more minutes. The autopsy report was to come in a day on priority basis, so Prakash thought there was no point in spending more time with this sub-inspector. *Asshole. So full of himself.*

One thing was clear to him – Nitin's murder was a conspiracy, which was shrewdly covered up under an organization called Mujahid-e-Bashariyat. The lone link to this outfit was also now gone with Afroz's death.

Someone somewhere was running the show quite magnificently. It was like a two-sided jigsaw puzzle. When one side looks perfectly assembled, the opposite side is hopelessly jumbled. The world was presently looking at the make-believe representation of order. Prakash was looking at its other side. The chaos. And the people behind the chaos.

I'm going to get you, he thought, a rush of adrenaline sweeping his body. It was time to roll up his sleeves and get dirty. He took out his mobile phone and dialled a number.

[11]
NEW DELHI

Seema re-read the mail she was about to send:
Subject: Regarding your mail to Nitin

Hi,

I'm an acquaintance of Nitin. I know you had tried to warn him of the dangers coming ahead. He had forwarded me your emails before his death, but he was too disturbed in his personal life to pay attention to your warnings. I really want to know what happened with Nitin. And I know you can help me with that. Please reply to me. We can talk.

You can trust me.

Seema

She had taken almost an hour and a half to draft this mail. Writing, editing and then rewriting – trying to sound as gentle and harmless as possible.

It was 11:30 PM. She was done with her dinner. So was Vidisha who was sleeping peacefully in her bedroom. She had helped her kid with her homework for about half an hour before she went to bed.

After her father's death two years ago, Vidisha had become very quiet and cut-off from the outer world. She was no longer like the naughty, talkative and playful children of her age. She was unusually obedient, much to the anxiety of her mother. She would come home from school every day and remain at home, sometimes watching TV, sometimes talking to her toys. Seema used to feel sad her daughter's mischievous giggles and yells had

stopped after her father's death.

But then Seema had changed too. She had gone into severe depression after Mohit's death, often locking herself in a room and crying for hours.

It was only with Prakash's help that she began pulling herself together. He used to be a close friend who had somehow distanced himself from her with time. But he came back into her life during her most tragic period. She noticed that Vidisha had begun to like his presence a lot. In his company, the little girl would often return to her cheerful self and without him she would regress into gloom.

Seema had always been aware of Prakash's feelings towards her since her Globe News days. But she always saw her alter ego in him. Both were so passionate about journalism that they often ignored their personal lives. That's why she knew it would never work out between them. Like two similar poles of a magnet, they would never stick.

Moreover, she had hardly been able to move on from Mohit. He had been the light of her life and now he was gone. Her heart did not have place for anyone else now. There was a void instead, which she had to fill somehow. So, she pushed herself harder professionally. She went on to win many awards over the months, making the world believe that she actually was a 'superwoman'. But deep within, she still lived with a sense of guilt. Of not being able to make Vidisha forget her past and move on. Of not being able to make peace with Mohit's absence.

A glance at her screensaver brought Seema back to where she was. She had not yet been able to find any clue to the owner of the email ID. In her mind, she had begun calling the user 'X'. Presently, the only way to reach X seemed to be through good old email.

She had tried assigning the job of tracing the email ID to a hacker her news channel often hired. But he could not be of much help. It was difficult to trace the email ID owner because the person was using a private IP address concealed by a proxy IP. The hacker was still able to bypass the user's proxy and get down to the location of the private router. But this was the best he could do. The router belonged to a popular Internet service provider in India, based out of Mumbai. Any further research would need access into its private network. Without the involvement of the police and a warrant signed by the magistrate, she would not be able to know who the sender was.

She studied the mail one last time and then decided to add her mobile

number at the end. *Just in case X wants to call me.* She had first thought of sending the mail from Nitin's mailbox, but then changed her plans. *Mail from a dead man may spook the user.* As a work around, she had now created a new Gmail account in her own name and was using this account to send the mail.

After a few moments of hesitation, she clicked on the 'Send' button.
Let's hope somebody responds.

Prakash stood on the pavement outside his hotel. The road in front of him, usually a busy street in the mornings, was washed completely in darkness in the absence of any streetlights. The weather was cool and pleasing, quite in contrast to the morning heat.

He looked around. *Not a single soul moves.* A couple of street dogs nonchalantly crossed the street in front. One of them looked at the unknown character standing across the street and gave a half-hearted bark.

He had been standing there for the last 20 minutes. The man he was waiting for had entered Ambala half an hour ago.

While the world slept peacefully, the journalist in Prakash was restless. What he had initially thought to be a small piece of news had now the makings of a profound conspiracy. And the fact that the guy he was after had died under mysterious circumstances told him that he might be in the right direction. *But what is that direction?*

What he was about to do was quite dangerous and could threaten his career as well. But he was willing to take that risk. Otherwise, this mystery was going to keep him occupied forever. Whenever he was about take a big risk, he would often tell himself that he has seen much worse things in life. To some extent, that was true.

He was once caught in the crossfire between two rival gangs in Goa. He had gone to do an interview with a drug lord of Russian origin known by the nickname 'Popo'. The don was boasting about how he kept everyone in the

system in his pocket, when one of his henchmen had rushed in hollering like a maniac – “Costa gang! Costa gang!” Before they could react, bullets rained on the wall behind them like hailstones. One of the attackers, who later tried to show some bravado by putting bullets into dead bodies, hit jackpot when he found Prakash alive. Thankfully, before he could squeeze his trigger, his eyes fell on Prakash’s media ID card. “*Aila!*” the man said and ran over to his boss. Soon, Prakash was shaking hands with the new don. ‘Sometimes, write about our gang also’, the kingpin said. ‘It helps our business.’ ‘Absolutely,’ Prakash replied and then bolted from that place.

Over the years, he had been in many such tough situations that had shaped his reputation as a crime reporter.

He squinted on seeing the headlights of an approaching car, the loud music played in it audible from this far. *Looks like him.* He started waving his hands. The car slowed down in response. He walked towards the car and stopped on the driver’s side.

A lean guy wearing thick-rimmed specs was at the wheel. He wore cargo pants and a T-shirt with a massive skull-and-bones graffiti drawn over it. Thin beard and moustache, shoulder length hair tucked behind his head in a ponytail, with a few strands of hair dangling over his face – he looked like a rapper, minus the jewellery.

“Hey, hey, hey. Stop the music!” Prakash said, trying desperately to keep his voice low. “The whole Ambala city will know that the great fucking Mrinal is here.”

Mrinal, grinning, opened his door and said in his usual hip-hop style of speaking, “It gives me the fuel to work through the night, baby.” He turned off his music player.

“Don’t come out of the car. Be seated. We need to talk,” Prakash said. He moved towards the other side of the car, got on to the front seat and closed the door.

“What’s this?” Mrinal whined. “I thought you’d have booked a room for me.”

“Yes, I have. But we need to go somewhere.”

“Go? Now? Man, it’s past 1 o’clock in this ghost town and you’re telling me we are going somewhere? I’ve been driving for last three hours. Even night-owls like me need rest,” he protested and then added with a wink, “By the way, we aren’t going for a date. Are we?”

“Buddy, I think I heard correctly when you said you’re willing to work for Globe News as an external consultant on this story. You’re getting paid by the hour. So, why not start talking about something serious.”

“OK. OK. Begin.”

“We are going to get into Afroz’s house now.”

“You got permission from the police so quickly?”

“No. We are going on our own. Without anybody’s permission.”

“Are you crazy? The police would have sealed that place. If we get caught, we’ll get our asses fried in jail.”

“I know, but we can’t wait. I have a hunch that we are going to find something big there. Something that these lousy policemen will never find, because they don’t suspect anything fishy in this case.”

“Spare me pal. I’m just a discarded equity analyst who feeds himself by working as a researcher-on-hire,” Mrinal said. “With all due respect to your injurious profession, I ain’t a journo. I’m a desk jockey!”

“Relax Mrinal. You don’t need to do anything there. Just hang around with me. I need an extra brain to get to the bottom of this.”

“Do you media guys always use consultants this way?” Mrinal asked with a frown, making Prakash almost laugh.

“You’re a genius. You need to be treated differently,” Prakash answered with a smile. He knew that a little bit of praise worked on his friend.

“You are so sweet,” Mrinal replied with a mocking smile. “But I’ll charge overtime rates.”

“I know, I know. You better justify your rates then.”

“Hmmm. So where’s the party tonight?”

Seema woke up with a start. She had passed out on her study table waiting for a response to her mail. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. Her reading lamp was still on. So was her laptop. She looked at her watch. 2 AM.

She thought about shutting down her laptop and moving to her bedroom, but was tempted to check her mailbox one last time. She unlocked her machine and eyed her Outlook screen. *One unread mail.* There was a reply to her mail. She felt her heartbeat rise as she clicked on the mail. It was a very curt reply.

‘I know you are not an acquaintance of Nitin. So, who are you exactly, Seema? And why should I trust you?’

Shit! Mr X or Miss X seems to know Nitin quite well. Seema understood that there was no point in hiding her identity now. She needed to build some trust. *This is the only chance I am going to get. X might not respond if I bluff again.* She began typing a reply.

I am a journalist with Century News. Can we talk? I just want to understand why Nitin did what he did? Is there anything more to it?

Not a single word will go out if you are not OK with it. But if you have something to say, why not confide in me? I have taken interviews of wanted Naxal leaders and Jihadi commanders, all with professionalism and trust. Only what they agree to, comes out as news.

Trust me.

Seema

She clicked on the Send button and started praying for a response.

They hardly came across any traffic as their car made its way through Jalbera Road.

“Take left from here and drive slowly,” Prakash instructed, as he counted the third lane from Manav Chowk. “And turn off the headlights.”

Mrinal complied. He reduced the speed to almost 10 KM/hour. “Which house?” he whispered.

Prakash didn’t reply. The darkness was making it difficult to locate things. He looked hard, trying to find any police tape stuck on the gates of the buildings passing by. He wondered whether Haryana Police even used those yellow ‘Crime Scene: Do not cross’ tapes or not.

After a minute of anxious looking around, he was finally able to see the familiar yellow tape on the gate of a short building. Mrinal was about to stop the car in front of the gate when Prakash told him to move on.

“Let’s keep the car a few houses away. We don’t want to alarm anybody by parking a car at night in front of the crime scene,” he said.

They finally parked the car about 50 meters away in a perfect dark spot.

“Now what, chief?” Mrinal said with a mocking face. “We break the doors and get in?”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that. If my intel is correct, we will have no problem getting in.”

“Can we be charged with ‘tampering with evidence’ or something like that?”

“As far as I know, the crime scene has already been thoroughly sifted and investigated by the police. So, every piece of evidence that can have any relation with the dead man has probably been collected already.”

“Wait a minute,” Mrinal asked. “What are we going in for if everything’s already collected?”

“I have a hunch that we are going to find something.”

“Wow. Sherlock Holmes,” Mrinal said and sighed. He looked nervous.

But then Prakash was himself a bit nervous. Ashish, his fellow local correspondent for Globe News had told him that the police wasn’t able to find any key to Afroz’s house. So, they had just chained it from outside. It meant there might be a way to get in.

Both of them got out of the car. These were summer days, but the weather post-midnight here was cold. Prakash started walking towards Afroz’s house, with Mrinal following him. His trouser pockets were bulging with a few tools he had bought for this adventure. An electrical hardware shop had sold him an LED-based torchlight and a small hacksaw. He had also carried along his favourite Victorinox Swiss Army knife. *I look like a burglar.*

On reaching the gate outside Afroz’s house, Prakash looked at the surrounding houses. *No lights. No peeping Toms.* The metal gate outside the small compound was not locked. Prakash opened it, taking extreme care to avoid making any noise.

Prakash and Mrinal were now standing on the small ground in front of the veranda. There was a bike standing beside.

Prakash moved up to the veranda and switched on his torch. He checked the door. A metal chain had been inserted into the door handles on either side of the door and then fastened with a lock. But because the chain was pretty long, it had become slack. So slack that the doors were almost half open. *God bless Ashish. This is good.*

“I think we both are slim enough to get into the house through this opening,” Prakash whispered. Mrinal was standing right behind him.

“This is a ridiculous way of securing a crime scene,” Mrinal said, grinning.

“I have seen worse things in my life,” Prakash replied. “Now let’s get in.”

He pushed the doors further in till the chain became taut. The opening was now wide enough to let them in easily. He lifted his right leg over the chain and then his left leg, and made his way inside. Mrinal followed suit.

Both were greeted by absolute darkness and damp smelling walls. Prakash moved the torch around to take a view of the living room. He saw a small table with two plastic chairs. There was a kitchen to his right and the way to a bedroom to his left. He could smell a faint odour of chemicals in the room. *Chemicals used by crime scene investigators.*

“Nothing seems to be of interest here. Let’s get into the bedroom,” Prakash whispered and started walking towards the bedroom. An eerie white chalk sketch on the floor greeted them. It was the outline of the body of the deceased.

“Holy shit!” Mrinal was taken aback seeing the glowing outline. “I can’t believe I am doing this.”

Prakash ignored his scared partner. He was a bit unsettled himself. He washed the room with torchlight again. The beam passed over a bed with a crumpled sheet tossed over it. A couple of pillows lay astray over it. At one corner of the room, a wooden cupboard attached to the wall stood partially open.

He bowed down and pointed the torchlight below the bed. His eyes caught a medium sized metal trunk, which appeared to be opened recently. He hauled it out. Its lock was broken. *Seems the police have gone through this also.* He pulled the lid. It opened with a shrill metallic creak, which made both of them cringe. In response, Prakash immediately turned off the torch. *Let’s hope no one has heard it.*

After a few moments, he turned on the torch again and flashed it inside the trunk. There were a few clothes and some documents. Prakash fixed the torch between his jaws and rummaged through them. There were photocopies of his education certificates. Afroz seemed to be a well-educated man. A copy of his degree certificate put him as a civil engineer. He also found a few packets of empty SIM cards. He passed them to Mrinal.

“Will the mobile numbers written on these packets be of any help?”

“I will have to see,” Mrinal said, putting them in his trouser pockets.

Prakash was busy sifting through the documents, when Mrinal nudged him.

“Did you just hear that?” Mrinal whispered. He sounded spooked.

“Hear what?”

“I heard some movement in the other room.”

A chill ran down Prakash’s spine. He immediately switched off the torch.

Both of them went silent for a moment, trying to listen to any movement. Nothing. They could only hear dogs barking somewhere far away.

Prakash continued his work. But he was not able to find anything useful. He closed the trunk and shoved it under the bed again. He now pointed the torch towards the cupboard. *This is our last hope.*

As he walked towards the cupboard, something started to bother Prakash – a half-formed thought trying to take shape. Probably something, which should have been in this house, but wasn't there. *What is it? What is it? What is it? Come on!*

Getting no answers, he ignored his feelings and looked inside the cupboard. Clothes – both ironed and crumpled lined the racks. There was a drawer too. He opened it. It contained a bike key, a few visiting cards from local shops and a photo frame. He picked the latter. It looked like a recent photo of Afroz, standing with a man. *Who are you?*

A cracking sound hit his ears. As if someone had tripped over an obstacle. He flashed his torchlight across the room. Mrinal was not there.

“Hey, Mrinal. Where are you?” Prakash whispered.

No reply.

He walked towards the living room. When he reached the door joining the two rooms, a ghostly figure leaped out of nowhere and gave him a solid jab on his face. Prakash yelped, lights flaring in his brain like numerous camera flashes at once. Before he could react, another blow struck his wrist and his torch was flung away.

A third punch would have hit his face again had he not ducked on time. The assailant's hand went on to hit the wooden door, evoking a stifled cry from his mouth. But, the man quickly improvised and Prakash was not ready for it. His knee rammed into Prakash's chest with a massive force. He slumped to the ground, writhing in pain.

The attacker was wearing heavy boots. Lying on the ground, Prakash heard the thuds from the man's footsteps proceed into the bedroom. What followed were sounds of the trunk being pulled and the cupboard being opened.

He took out his Swiss Army knife and pulled out the part that converted it into a knife. Carrying it in one hand, he wriggled away from the door where he was lying. Feeling dazed, he summoned all his strength, taking support of the wall to stand again. A smell of burning touched his nose. *What is the man*

up to?

He heard the thak-thak sound from the heavy boots again. The man was coming out of the bedroom towards him. Prakash held the knife tightly in his hands. As soon as the man passed in front of him, he plunged the knife into what felt like his shoulder. The man whimpered in pain. But like a trained professional, he swung his elbow forcefully in a reflex action. It crashed into Prakash's jaw, tossing his full body backwards. His head struck the wall. There was no turning off the flash bulbs in his brain now. Before his mind blanked out, he thought about Mrinal. Was he dead or alive?

“Prakash... are you OK?”

Someone was whispering in his ears. His eyes opened for a second, but shut down again, dazzled by the dim light in the room. He opened his eyes again, slowly this time. His neck felt numb, something icy pinching his skin. He realized he was lying flat on the cold concrete. Someone was standing bent over his body, holding a lighted mobile phone. It was Mrinal. *He's alive. Good.*

Prakash took the support of the wall behind him and stood up. His head was spinning. He waved his palm over his scalp. A burst of pain shot through his body when his fingers touched a wound behind his head. The area was moist. *Blood.*

“Who the hell was he?” Prakash asked.

“I wanted to ask you the same thing,” Mrinal replied. He sounded jittery. “The son-of-a-bitch punched my eye.”

“How long have I been lying there?”

“10-15 minutes... who knows? I wasn't fucking counting seconds.”

“Let's get out...” Prakash stopped before completing his sentence. “Is something burning?”

Mrinal nodded.

Prakash snatched the mobile phone from him and dashed into the bedroom. He saw that the metallic trunk had been pulled out and a plume of smoke was coming from it. He bent over it. There was nothing but smouldering ashes in the box. He went towards the cupboard. It seemed empty. The drawer was also empty, except for the key.

“It seems things were taken out of this cupboard too, and then burnt,” Prakash said.

“So, your gut feeling was correct,” Mrinal said, hunched over the trunk fire. “Somebody going so far to destroy evidence means that there is some conspiracy going on.”

“That’s what’s worrying me. Let’s get out of here quickly. We are like sitting ducks here.”

Both of them hastened towards the living room and wriggled out of the front door. Prakash could feel a throbbing pain in his chest as he walked. His jaw was also hurting.

They rushed towards their car, which now appeared to be so distant. Prakash reached the vehicle first and looked behind. Mrinal was walking like a drunkard – completely dazed.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah... kind of,” Mrinal groaned.

“You want me to drive?” He felt as if his chest was squeezed between the jaws of a monkey wrench, but still offered, feeling a bit apologetic for putting Mrinal in danger.

“No. I can do it,” Mrinal said, opening the driver-side door. Prakash took the seat beside him.

“Did you see the face of the man?”

“The last time I checked human beings couldn’t see shit in darkness, Einstein!” Mrinal whined. After a few seconds, he said apologetically, “The bastard hit me from behind first. And then gave me a black eye.... No. I wasn’t able to see him.”

“Must have been a tough guy. I stabbed him with my Swiss knife, though.”

“How glad would I be to pump a bullet into that man’s ass?” Mrinal leaned his head on the steering wheel for a few moments, taking a couple of deep breaths. Then he lifted his head and growled, “Let me ask you a pretty straight-forward question. What the ‘fuck’ were we looking for in that house?”

“When we went inside, I was just looking for random clues. But now I know what I’m looking for – Afroz’s mobile phone. The police were also looking for his phone, but could not locate it.”

“So you thought you could become a cowboy and find something so

obvious which the investigators missed?”

“He might have hidden it somewhere.”

“Yeah... in some underground safe, which can be opened by a secret key,” Mrinal sneered. “Good heavens!”

His words struck Prakash like a bolt from the sky. There was a ‘key’ and he had never paid proper attention to it. *How could I have missed this?*

“I am going back,” Prakash said with excitement.

“Now what?” Mrinal protested.

“I’ll tell you. Just wait here for me.”

Prakash got down and ran towards the house. He went in, holding his own mobile phone for light. He rushed towards the cupboard and took out the key from its drawer. *It’s a bike key. Bad miss.*

He came outside and threw light over the parked bike. He found what he was looking for. There was a small storage case above the engine. He inserted the key in its lock. It opened. There was a crumpled polythene bag inside.

Prakash brought his mobile phone close to the bag and started sifting through its contents. There were a few tools for bike repair, a first aid kit... and a mobile phone. *Voila.*

He took the phone and kept back all other stuff in the bike. Exactly when he turned, he saw a jeep pull over at the gate. A red light was blinking over its roof. *Police. Shit!*

Raman stood under the cover of darkness in a narrow alley overlooking Afroz's house. His fists were clenched, teeth digging into his lips in anger. *Sultan, you son-of-a-bitch.* Sultan was the man he took his orders from. The man responsible for this madness. He felt like a fool to have followed his boss's instructions and gone back to the crime scene. In fear that one of the papers might lead investigators back to him, Sultan had ordered him to burn and destroy every document present in Afroz's house.

Raman had refused point blank. He was an assassin and not a clean-up guy. But, his boss was adamant. He said he had no other guys in this region to fall back on. And it would not be a tough job. *'Just get in. Pile up all the documents. And light a fire. That's it.'*

He took up the assignment, only because he didn't want to piss Sultan off. The man was dangerous. But by doing so, he was breaking his policy of not doing anything with any assignment once it was over. Many a times in the past, this policy had saved him from landing into unnecessary problems, like the one he was in now.

He looked at his blood soaked shirt. The wound wasn't deep, but was bleeding profusely. The presence of two men inside the house was totally unexpected and had taken him off-guard. His immediate reaction would have been to use a silencer on his gun and take both of them out. But that would have opened a new can of worms. So, he had decided to use hand-to-hand combat to disable the guys momentarily.

But one of them had surprised him by stabbing him. It pained like hell.

Still, pain was not his immediate concern. He was more worried over what the man had found in Afroz's bike. *I should have paid attention to the key.*

He would have pounced on the man now itself, but there was a police jeep standing outside the house. *Someone must have noticed the smoke and then informed the police.*

He kept looking at the police jeep from his position. There was a slight argument between the policeman and the other guy. The officer ordered the latter to sit in the jeep and then drove away. *Shit! Will have to wait till he gets out of custody.*

The man's accomplice was also nowhere to be seen, turning this operation into a big failure. Sultan should have listened to me, Raman grumbled. But now, the asshole would not hear any excuses. He would want the case closed. *I will have to finish off the matter. Quickly.*

Seema was woken up from her sleep by the ringing of her cell phone. With half-closed eyes red from last night's sleeplessness, she looked at the number. It was an unknown landline number. She was jolted back to her senses in a second. She picked up the call and said hello with bated breath.

"You want to meet me?" a guttural voice said. "Come to Cascades bar in Karol Bagh at noon. And come alone."

Before Seema could reply, the caller hung up the phone.

She sat upright in her bed. *So, finally things are moving.*

Prakash sat hunched over the floor of the police lock-up. Behind him, there was a long bench for people to sit. But presently, a filthy drunkard was spread over it like an overfed python. The stench of urine from the attached urinal kept reaching his nostrils every now and then, making him squirm. This was a first in his career. He chuckled. *Going to jail. Check!*

He felt good that Mrinal was not with him. *Poor guy. He would have fainted. Good that he fled with his car.*

A constable came near the jail door and opened it. He pointed a finger at Prakash and said, “Hey, you! *Sahib* wants to see you.”

He escorted Prakash to the sub-inspector’s desk where Mohan Kumar and Ashish were already sitting. Ashish opened his mouth to say something, but was gestured to stop by Mohan.

“So reporter *sahib*, I had never thought we would meet so soon. What the hell were you doing at Afroz’s house?” the sub-inspector asked.

“I was investigating,” Prakash replied with a blank face.

“By trespassing into somebody else’s house?” Mohan said, raising his voice. “How experienced are you Mister in your profession?”

“About twelve years.”

“And in twelve fucking years, you couldn’t understand the rules of journalism?”

Prakash wanted to give him a fitting reply, but kept silent. Challenging this man’s ego would have made matters worse. He decided to bluff his way

out of trouble. "Well, I thought I could uncover a few clues which will only help your cause."

"Is it so? Then why did you burn the documents of Afroz?"

"I didn't. There was one more guy in the house. He attacked me and made me unconscious," said Prakash, showing him the injury marks on his face and chest. "This man has burnt the documents. You should be after him, not me."

Mohan frowned, as if pondering over what to do.

Ashish came to Prakash's rescue. He said in a coaxing tone, "Sirji, you know our profession. We need stories. I agree that sometimes we cross a few boundaries, but hope you don't misunderstand our intentions. They are the same as yours."

Prakash nodded. He was impressed with Ashish.

"Let this guy go this time. I promise you nothing like this will ever be repeated," requested Ashish.

"You guys never write anything good about the police. But when you are in trouble, you come to us like sissies," Mohan complained. "I'll let this guy go. But you'll have to return the favour. The Bisla kidnapping case has been solved. How about showing my interview on TV?"

"Done, Sir. Done. I will take care of this," Ashish said, winking at Prakash.

"OK. But tell your colleague to move out of Ambala immediately. I don't want any more sniffing around."

"*Bilkul sir*. Absolutely," Ashish said, standing up from his chair. He gestured Prakash to walk out.

Just when Prakash was about to go, Mohan motioned him to stop.

He asked, "Did you have a look at the man in the house?"

"No. It was dark," Prakash replied.

"What do you think? Was he a clean-up guy from that Mujahid group?"

"I think so."

The sub-inspector made a brooding face. Prakash could sense what he was thinking. *More trouble in Ambala.*

Once outside the police station, Ashish told him to ride pillion on his bike. They would have moved about a kilometre when Ashish stopped his bike on the roadside. Both of them got down.

"What the fuck did you do yesterday?" Ashish asked with anger.

“Didn’t I tell you guys?” Prakash replied, “I was following up on the Afroz case.”

“You could have let me known, at least.”

“It was all too fast. Besides, there’s no point in taking too many people.”

“Oh yes... And why would you let me know if you were trespassing into a crime scene?” Ashish shouted. “You can get fired for this, you know? You could have been rotting in jail. Globe News could have been in news for God’s sake!”

“Hey, hey, hey kiddo. Thanks for saving my ass today. You ever get caught in New Delhi; I’ll help you out. But, let’s not make a fucking moral issue of it,” Prakash spat. “Without getting into dirt, there is no journalism. This is how I do my reporting.”

“Not in my region please. Afroz’s case is my responsibility in Ambala. I am going to report your actions to the headquarters.”

“Be my guest,” Prakash scoffed and walked away.

12:30 PM, KAROL BAGH, NEW DELHI

Seema was sitting inside the dim-lighted Cascades bar since the last 45 minutes and there was no sign of her visitor. The extremely loud hard metal rock being played was giving her a headache. She tried calling the man's number again. It was switched off. *Is it a prank?*

Many people had come and gone. Whenever somebody came in through the door, she would look for a second longer at the person's face. *Hope it doesn't send any wrong signal.*

Her phone started ringing. It was an unknown number. Different from the one she had seen in the morning. She picked it up.

"I am sitting three tables behind you," the voice said.

Seema turned around. There was an old man sitting at one of the tables, with a mobile phone in his hand. He raised his hand to say hello.

Seema stood up and went near his table. "How long have you been watching me?" she asked.

"Sorry to make you wait. Just wanted to make sure no one was with you. Please take a seat," the man said, pointing to a chair in front of him.

Seema carefully looked at the man while she took her seat. His thinning white hair and loose skin on the neck placed him easily in his sixties. His eyes were looking much larger behind the thick glasses he was wearing. He had ordered a whisky.

"May I know who you are and how do you know Nitin Tomar?" Seema asked.

The man first looked around like a wary house sparrow and then whispered, "It's too dangerous for me to spill the beans just like that. First tell me what will you do with the information I'm going to give you?"

"That depends on what you're going to tell. As of now, I just want to know if Nitin Tomar's story is as simple as it looks. Or is there some catch?"

"What I am going to tell you is not about Nitin Tomar. He's just a part of the game."

Seema frowned. "What game?"

"Everything you see around yourself is a part of some game."

"Can we come to the point, please?"

"OK. OK. Let me begin with my introduction," the man said. "My name is Dr Kalyan Ghosh. I used to run a psychiatry practice in Chennai five years ago. But now I am running for my life. I have changed ten cities in the last three years. I change my mobile number every now and then."

"Why so?"

"Because I know too much about them. They are extremely powerful," he whispered and looked around himself. "Who knows, they may be tracking me now as we speak?"

"Dr Kalyan, I'm not getting a single word of what you speak. You can tell me anything. I am a journalist. I can help you get heard."

"Now where have I heard that before?" he sneered. "Do you know a man named Anupam Krishnamachari?"

"The journalist with Times? ... Who disappeared a couple of years ago?"

"Yes. One night, he was talking to me exactly as you do. I gave him more info than he could chew. I guess he called up a few people and came under the spotlight of the bad guys. He vanished in a few days."

Seema remained silent for a few moments. The man was clearly giving her a warning before spilling the beans. It was up to her to take the bait or not. *What secret is so deep that it could make me disappear? Who are these powerful people?*

She made up her mind. *To hell with these people.* She said, "I am not scared of these people. I've tackled many such assholes in my career. You can tell me your little secret."

The man closed his eyes for a moment and smiled. "You're a brave girl. But if you really think that I'm going to tell you all in this public place, then you are asking for too much. I came here because I wanted to see the person

who sent me the mails.”

He gulped a mouthful of his whisky and continued, “Girl, look at me. I’m old and on the run. It’s time for me to sit at home and enjoy with the retirement money. I can’t do that, because I have pissed off some evil people. As far as the Nitin Tomar episode goes, I had written mails to warn him, because I knew what kind of things were going to happen with him. But, he didn’t pay any heed to them. So, it’s a closed chapter for me now. As for you, I don’t want you to put you in any danger. You can’t fathom how brutal these men can be.”

The man stood up from his chair and placed a few hundred notes on his table for his bill.

“Are you leaving?” Seema objected. “Just like that?”

The man took out an envelope from his trouser pocket and gave it to Seema. “This is some food for your thought. That’s all I can give you now. If you make any progress, we’ll meet again. Just understand one thing – this is not a one off case,” he said and walked off.

When he was out of the bar, Seema opened the envelope. It contained a few printouts of news snippets taken from the internet. She read the headings:

- Filmmakers find beheaded skeletons in Bandhavgarh
- No action yet on Bandhavgarh skeletons
- Mass graves in Bandhavgarh?

3:20 PM, AMBALA EXECUTIVE INN

Prakash was woken up by the bell. Someone was ringing it incessantly. He checked his watch. *I have been sleeping for the last five hours.* He remembered dozing off after trying to call Mrinal from his hotel room. He was unreachable.

He grimaced on hearing two more bells before he could reach the door. *Who is it?* His whole body ached as he budged his hand to open the door. Outside stood Mrinal, with his trademark smirk.

“Wake up, dude, wake up,” Mrinal said and got inside. He appeared unruffled, as if nothing wrong had happened yesterday night.

“Where have you been? I was worried about you,” Prakash asked with a half-yawn. He looked at his friend’s face. It had a large red blotch below his right ear. *Uh. Must have hurt.*

“I’ve booked a room in another hotel,” Mrinal said, sitting on his bed. “How was jail, though?”

“Don’t ask. I almost got my ass cooked and served on a platter. It’s only because of Ashish that I’m out so soon,” Prakash replied. He immediately felt sorry for behaving rudely with Ashish. *Will say sorry to him sometime.*

“Good,” Mrinal said. “But what did you find in Afroz’s house last night? You ran as if you found a goldmine.”

“I found this, *ta da...*” Prakash said with a smile, taking out a mobile phone from under his pillow. It was an old Nokia 1100. “And guess what? It has a SIM card.”

“Holy shit! That’s awesome,” Mrinal replied, taking the phone from Prakash. “But we can only know how useful it is after going through the call history and contacts.”

“That’s where you come into the picture. Do you have a multi-pin charger?”

“Yeah, I have. Our wild goose chase better get a new direction from this,” he gushed.

Prakash eyed the enthusiasm in Mrinal with interest. On seeing the mobile phone, his friend looked as animated as a child who after trying hard to repair his toy airplane, sees it fly again. Even after last night’s scary episode, he didn’t seem in a mood to pack up and leave.

“So, you’re still in. Right?” Prakash asked with hesitation. But, he didn’t want Mrinal to say ‘No’.

“Yeah... I am. But...”

“But?”

“Overtime rates,” Mrinal said and laughed.

Prakash too, giggled and said, “You know, when I first saw you today at my door with that swollen jaw, I thought you would say ‘I’m done with your fucking investigation’ and then leave Ambala.”

Mrinal smiled. “You want to know how I felt after getting punched last night?” he said with excitement. “I felt relieved. Liberated. This is so much fun compared to the boring stuff I do for a living.”

Prakash looked at Mrinal the way a mathematician looks at a fascinating problem. Even after knowing him for a few years, he still struggled to understand him. His friend was a man of contradictions. He had the looks of Prince Charming – extremely fair, blue eyes and a chiselled, almost feminine face reminiscent of Victoria’s Secret showstoppers. But he tried hard to bury these features behind his loud, rapper-style dressing, stubbly face and thick glasses. He was thirty-two, a guy of unusual intelligence, yet his behaviour and lifestyle belonged to that of a chaotic twenty year old. He called himself a desk jockey and tried to steer clear of danger. But inside, probably unknown to him, he was a man who liked a life of thrill and adventure. He was a mystery. *The more I know him, the lesser I know him.*

“Don’t fall in love with me, bro.” Mrinal said, interrupting his thoughts.

“I won’t,” Prakash quipped. “I was just thanking the man we came across yesterday night. One thrashing and you have come back a changed man. I

wonder...”

“The next time I meet that motherfucker, I am going to give him a spear tackle. Mark my words!”

“I don’t want to face that man next time. He could have killed us right there, but probably didn’t do so because he risked bringing the case into police spotlight.”

Mrinal stood silent for a moment, thinking. “I have grown some real respect.”

“For what?”

“For the kind of things weirdo journos like you do to get a story.”

Prakash couldn’t fathom whether that was a compliment or a jibe.

“So, when am I getting all the info squeezed out from the mobile phone?” he asked.

“Maybe a few hours.”

“How do you do it?” Prakash asked with a cunning smile.

“How do I do what?”

“How do you dig up so much information about everything? I mean, whatever you dish out is strictly private information. What’s your secret sauce?”

“It’s a trade secret,” Mrinal said, winking. “If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.”

Seema stood outside the glass cabin of her boss Diya Shah, the editor-in-chief of Century News. She could see her talking on her mobile phone in an animated manner. A man dressed in a suit was sitting across from the lady, with his back towards her. Diya caught a glance of Seema and gestured her to come in.

As Seema pushed the cabin door to enter, she came face to face with the man in the suit. Tall, thin, with an oblong face. Exquisite dressing. Neatly combed hair. The man was straight out of Forbes magazine. *Oh my God!* She stared at him with amazement. *Anwar Shah!*

The man cleared his throat, suggesting she was blocking his way. She said “sorry” and allowed him to pass.

Wow!

Anwar Shah was a billionaire business magnate and the illustrious brother of Diya Shah. While she headed Century News, her brother led its holding company known as the Centennium Group having interests in media, fashion, shipping, chemicals and garment manufacturing businesses. The man was credited with creating this great empire from scratch.

Seema idolized Anwar Shah since her college days. She still remembered the inspiring speech he made during her convocation.

‘Impossibility is an inherent part of nature, an ancient beast. It instils fear in your heart. Yet, you have to accept it, embrace it. It’ll be a terrible experience, mind you. But you need to bear it and then forget it. Just put a

number on that piece of memory and lock it in a closet inside your mind.

What's that number, you might ask. Well, it's the probability. Of you succeeding, against all odds. And it will be low, very low. That's why you need to hide it from your eyes. Just remember that your probability of succeeding is never zero.

Once you have done that, use every quantum of energy available in your body to achieve what people so fondly call as the impossible. You can do it. I know that. And the day you do, you'll realize that the number didn't matter at all.'

Years later, she had been so excited when she got an opportunity to join Century News. It felt like a privilege to work in a company owned by Anwar Shah. The charm had still not faded completely. In fact, after this encounter, it had been reignited.

"Where have you been dear? I was looking for you since morning," Diya said, bringing Seema back to the present world.

She looked at her boss, studying her face, trying to spot any resemblance to her brother. Surprisingly, the brother-sister duo didn't seem to have any similarity in their facial features. *Would they be that different from the inside?* No, she thought. Though she didn't know Anwar Shah personally, she imagined him to have a nature quite similar to his sister's.

She had always seen Diya as a ruthless boss who kept demanding the impossible from her staff. It appeared that her whole family had a fascination with impossibility. These guys were born with an innate desire to whack impossibility out of the park. Forty-plus and unmarried, the lady had created a name for herself in the media industry in a short span. Running a large media house was not easy. It was only through her passion that she had managed to turn around a nose-diving media company.

"Are you lost?" Diya clicked her fingers. "I wanted to know if you're working on a story."

"Oh...sorry...I was following up on a lead in the Nitin Tomar case."

"The child killer? Good that the son-of-a-bitch is dead. What was the name of the group, which killed him? Some Mujahideen or something..."

"Mujahid-e-Bashariat."

"Yeah... where do they find names like those?" she said. "This outfit was a one man shop. Right?"

"That's what everyone is saying. I don't agree, however. Mohammed

Afroz, the sniper who killed Nitin is dead within 72 hours of that incident. That too of drug overdose. Something doesn't fit here."

"Hmm..." Diya said with a doubtful face. "Our local correspondent is covering the story at Ambala. You aren't planning to go to there by any means. Are you?"

"Not as of now. I'm looking at a new angle. There might be a huge conspiracy behind all this."

"What kind of conspiracy?"

"I can't get into details now," Seema said. "I myself am not sure of what to believe and what not to. But I think things will get clearer in a few days."

"So you want to say there might be an explosive story in whatever you are doing?"

"I think so."

"Keep working then. In case, you face any bureaucratic or political hurdles, just let me know."

Seema nodded. She knew what Diya meant. She was hinting at her brother's power. Anwar Shah had a deep say in national politics and policy making.

Seema came to her cubicle and opened the envelope Dr Kalyan Ghosh had handed to her. She took out eight pages of black and white printouts containing news articles from Times of India, Navbharat Times and a couple of unknown news sites.

She read and reread each of the articles. When she was done, she had a frown on her face.

Time to visit Bandhavgarh.

The rush on the New Delhi roads reached its peak as soon as dusk began to shroud the city. Intimacy of a crowd madly running after public transport and the milieu of vehicles honking in traffic jams often gives people a sense of security. A feel that no one can do them any harm in such a public place.

Dr Kalyan Ghosh was also guilty of putting his guard down with such a false sense of security. A lot of things were going on in his mind, as he plodded on the footpath trying to locate the place where his bus would stop. He had been hiding in the city for almost three months, rarely moving out from his one room house he had rented in Paharganj. He had no friends. He seldom called his family living in Durgapur, not to put them in danger. *They might be sniffing into our phones.*

But there were a lot of things he wanted to talk to somebody, but had not been able to summon courage to do so. It was years since somebody had approached him. He just couldn't avoid meeting Seema, even though he was scared of coming out in the open.

Now, after talking to her, he somehow felt reassured that the truth will eventually come out. He had taken care to keep the meeting at a secure place. And he had given her a major clue just to see what she comes out with. At the end of the meeting, he had made up his mind to tell her the complete story when they meet next.

He stopped and looked around. By mistake, he had moved half a kilometre ahead of his bus stop. As soon as he turned around and started

walking back, his eyes fell over a group of 2-3 people. They were all looking at him, but turned their gazes abruptly. That was a troubling sign.

He looked at the men again. In the evening light, their faces were not visible clearly. One of them was a tall, bearded man who seemed vaguely familiar to him. *Bangalore! I had seen him in Bangalore.* He could sense danger. His heart started beating faster and his body began trembling.

He reversed his direction, took a few steps slowly and then darted down the footpath. The men chased him. He looked back. *Three guys. Help me, God.*

He ran as fast as he could. But the crowd, moving in the opposite direction, was impeding his sprint. He looked behind again. There were now only two guys on his trail. The bearded man was gone. *Where's the third one?* There was no time to think.

A traffic policeman was standing nearby. For once, he thought of going to him and asking for help. But then, he saw one of his pursuers pull out something from his trousers. *A pistol.* A sudden chill passed through Dr. Kalyan's body. Next second, the bearded man came out of nowhere and stabbed him below the rib cage using a small knife. Pain shot through his body. Like a cornered animal, Dr Kalyan shoved his opponent with a huge force. The bearded man fell on the ground.

Dr Kalyan looked behind. One of his pursuers had aimed his pistol at him.

His last chance was now. He jumped on the busy street and tried to cross the road. A couple of cars soared past him, narrowly missing. He could hear a few vehicles behind himself, pushing their brakes and screeching. He kept on running. *Only a few meters more.*

A car finally hit him from behind. He was flung away a few meters, landing on the road again. He knew it was all over. He saw his last moments. He saw his family, his two sweet daughters and then he saw himself – smiling, in an idyllic land.

But he came back to reality in a second. He was not dead yet. He saw the three men standing at one far end of the road, staring at him, but not able to gather the courage to cross a busy road. He felt dizzy, but still managed to stand up. He could feel the salty taste of blood in his mouth.

A bus moved past him, honking its horn loudly. He used all his energy to latch onto its door handle and clamber on to it. He was pulled in by the

people standing on the bus door. The bus kept running at its speed.

Before passing out, Dr Kalyan became aware of one thing. That he was alive.

But, for how long?

Though small, Bandhavgarh National Park is one of the most popular national parks in India. Located in Madhya Pradesh, it is famous for Bengal tigers, having their highest density in the world.

Two years ago, a group of wildlife documentary makers from National Geographic stayed in Bandhavgarh for about one week. It had been one of the most prolific visits for them that year. They had had ample sightings of Bengal tigers and rare species like the Malabar hornbills and the Four-horned Antelope.

But there was something else for which that trip would haunt them forever. During one of their filming sessions for Indian hyenas, they had accidentally stumbled into what later turned out to be a mass grave of humans. One of the hyenas had dug up a hole in the ground, from which a skeleton hand was protruding.

By the time the police and crime scene investigators reached the spot, the local media had created a sensation. After a four feet deep excavation, the police found three headless skeletons with their skulls lying alongside. Not a shred of clothing was present on the skeletons to allow for any identification.

The post-autopsy report termed their deaths as “cold-blooded murder”, having taken place about six to seven years ago from then. The victims were estimated to be in their early twenties. While the cleanly dismembered neck bone indicated a single hit from a sharp edged weapon like an axe or a heavy sword, a deep gash on one of the skulls pointed definitively to an axe.

The question was – Who were these victims?

The police came out with a list of fifteen people who had disappeared and hence had been presumed dead in the nearby districts about 6-7 years ago. Only six of them fit the age and height criteria. Four of them belonged to the same engineering college and had disappeared on the same day. Their names were Vikram Pandey, Kunal Chaubey, Anil Jaiswal and Ratan Pathak. It was rumoured that these kids had gone into the jungle to party, but had never returned.

A series of investigations, which involved collecting DNA samples from their family members and matching them with the DNA found on the skeletons, finally confirmed the identities of the victims. The deceased were – Vikram, Anil and Ratan, brutally murdered about six years ago. No trace though could be found of the fourth person – Kunal Chaubey.

Seema's mind kept juggling between numerous questions as her flight took off for Jabalpur.

Was Kunal Chaubey the killer or was he also dead? Why were the youngsters killed? But the biggest question of them all was – *What has it got to do with the Nitin Tomar case?*

She closed her eyes. A much needed sleep before the goose hunt.

Prakash had never seen Mrinal work in front of him. He really wanted to know what his 'trade secret' was. He knocked on the door of Mrinal's hotel room. The door opened and Prakash peeped in curiously. He saw Mrinal talking to someone on the phone.

The state of the room killed much of Prakash's enthusiasm. It gave him the feel of a call-center, with multiple mobile phones ringing and many weird user interfaces open on Mrinal's laptop. A thick cloud of cigarette smoke enveloped the room. The bed was a complete mess with all of Ambala's gadgets lying there with their crisscrossing wires.

Even with his limited knowledge of electronic gadgetry, Prakash was able to figure out that a few devices were card readers, the ones used to access the data on smart cards and magnetic swipes. He noticed a SIM card inserted into one of the card readers, which was connected to Mrinal's laptop.

"Hey, I told you I'll come to you. Not the other way round," Mrinal said, seeing Prakash trying to peek into the laptop screen. "You aren't authorized to see how I work." He was done with his phone call.

"Now I know how the great Mrinal works," Prakash said.

"No sir, you still don't know a lot of things about me."

"What's so secretive about you? Are you a spy?" Prakash asked. "By the way, seeing the amount of heat and smoke your room generates, I would suggest, you keep the fire brigade's number on speed dial."

Mrinal smiled.

“Any luck with Afroz’s mobile?” Prakash changed the topic.

“Not much luck. He has barely used this SIM card. I could find only one man named Ramesh Puri, who he had called from his mobile. The call was made in the vicinity of a warehouse near Grand Trunk Road. I have an address of this man, but as usual it’s fake. Which means we might be on the right track.”

Prakash’s eyes lighted up on hearing what Mrinal just said. “When was this call made? Was it before Nitin Tomar’s killing?” he asked.

Mrinal pulled up a post-it note stuck on his table and said looking into it, “It was made about two weeks before his killing. Is that significant?”

“Yes. Because the video created by MeB denouncing and threatening Nitin Tomar also started circulating around that time only. You know, there’s something that has been bothering me since we checked out Afroz’s house.”

“And what’s that?”

“We didn’t come across any video recording instrument in his house. And neither did the police. So the question that begs an answer now is – Where was this threat video recorded? I have studied that video so many times trying to figure out where exactly it has been shot. The only thing I could infer is that the place looked like a large shop floor in a factory or....”

“A warehouse,” Mrinal said.

It was after a long time that Seema was inside an educational institution. As she passed through the teachers' corridor, she felt good to see young boys and girls moving around. A few of them stared at her, curiously eyeing the new visitor in their campus. She asked around to locate the dean's office and approached the peon sitting outside. He was an old and frail looking man, who ideally should have retired decades ago.

"Tell Amar Mani Singhji that Seema from Century News is here."

"Please go ahead," said the old man with a shaky voice. "He's expecting you."

On entering the Dean's room, Seema came across a balding man with a moustache, who got up to greet her. He was possibly in his early fifties. His desk was loaded with files and documents. She also saw a couple of dog-eared books on Indian history. An ashtray was loaded to the brim, suggestive of a heavy smoker.

He asked Seema for tea or coffee, which she politely declined. Her cab was waiting outside and she wanted to get it over with quickly.

"As I'd told you, we're covering the Bandhavgarh skeletons story. Considering the fact that the four kids were from your college, I thought you might be able to give us a backstory."

"Why so much interest in the story now?" the Dean asked. "I'm curious about this ever since you called me."

"We are making a documentary on some of the unsolved and most

baffling cases of India,” Seema replied. “And this mystery easily qualifies as one.”

“Well, if you ask me, there’s nothing baffling about this case. It’s unsolved till now only because the police have not done their bit. There have been no arrests till date.”

“Why don’t you tell me a bit from the beginning?”

The man took out a cigarette from his pocket and asked Seema if she minded if he smoked. She shook her head. *It’s your cabin. Do as you like.*

“It was eight years ago. The final exams of the third year batch had just ended,” he said, taking a puff from the cigarette. “As usual, every kid wanted to party. But these four pricks went overboard. The Bandhavgarh jungles are nearby. So, they decided to party there.”

“Partying in a jungle full of wild animals... Isn’t that prohibited?”

“Well, even smoking is prohibited inside our college campus,” he said with a grin. “We have all kinds of rules here. Only nobody bothers to follow them. And to tell you the truth, I was fed up of shepherding these buggers. One beats up a junior, one molests a girl, one comes drunk to the class. If I keep getting into every such issue, I’ll lose my sleep.”

“How did they get away from your campus?”

“Two of the kids had their own bikes. So, escaping from the campus was easy for them. These guys left our campus after lunch and that was the last time anybody saw them. Their plan was outrageous. They wanted to have a bonfire in the jungle, can you imagine? Little bastards! They even stole an axe from the hostel tool room to cut firewood.”

“Was it the same axe which was used to kill them?”

“I’m not sure. These are the stories I have come to hear only in the subsequent years.”

“Tell me more about these kids.”

“Well, these guys were not bad at studies. Ratan was even one of the toppers. Kunal used to be good at sports.”

“Kunal Chaubey is the same guy who is still missing. Isn’t he?”

“Yes. Poor chap. You know, he had lost his parents in a car accident a year ago. I’ve heard that he used to be really low and depressed since then.”

“Was he used to getting angry? Or of the kind who may harm others?”

“I know where you’re going with this. It seems to be an easy conclusion that Kunal Chaubey might have killed his friends and then run away. The

only thing missing is a motive. I've asked other students. No one ever believed that Kunal is capable of such a thing. In fact, he was trying to recover from his depression. I've heard that he was even seeing a psychiatrist."

"Which psychiatrist?"

"I don't know the name. As I've have told you already. I know most of these stories through hearsay only."

"Did they have any enemies? Sometimes, small fights at their age could take a violent turn."

"We've explored that option as well. Our college is a peaceful place. Without much disturbance. Students here get along well with the locals. So, no, I don't think these kids had any enemies."

"In other words, it was a complete surprise to find these kids dead in the jungle."

"That's true. I've tried many times to uncover this mystery on my own. But with the police not helping, I have failed."

"What makes me curious Singhji is that their skeletons were found so many years later. Weren't people searching for them at the right places?"

"We searched for them like mad dogs. We knew they had gone into the jungle. But madam, Bandhavgarh is a huge national park. It is practically impossible to search the whole forest."

"What about their bikes?"

"Their bikes were never found."

"And, why were there no clothes on their skeletons?"

"I don't know. You can ask the police," the Dean said, with a hint of frustration on his face. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again.

"You want to know what I believe?" he spat. "I think they came across some really fiendish people in the jungle. They were mercilessly killed and then buried to prevent the discovery of their bodies. Their clothes and belongings were removed and burnt. Their bikes were also taken away. I'm telling you, some day we are going to find Kunal Chaubey's skeleton also, buried somewhere else in the jungle. I believe they're all dead. Killed by the devil himself."

Seema did not ask any more questions. She was done.

2:30 PM, AJK UMARIA POLICE STATION

AJK Umaria was the third police station she visited today. The first two were Chandia and Indwar police stations, from which she had to return empty handed. People there had very little idea about the skeletons case. A head-constable in Indwar police station had told her to visit AJK Umaria for more information. They were the ones who had worked in the skeletons case two years ago.

This was the last police station she intended to visit. It had been a tiring journey for her on this wild goose chase. She had made up her mind to contact Dr Kalyan once she was back in Delhi. *He will have to answer me this time.*

Her cab, which she had booked from Jabalpur, stood outside the police station as she went inside the small and dingy building. The SHO's desk was empty. There was only a single constable sitting at a desk in a dark corner of the room. She went there and introduced herself.

The man had probably never come across the media. He got really excited with the prospect of being seen on the TV, but Seema dampened his spirits by telling him that she was only investigating and there was no camera team. The constable told her that everybody except him had gone on a police raid somewhere.

Seema asked him about the skeletons case. His answers to her questions were similar to the ones she had heard in other police stations.

“Madam, cases like these are extremely difficult to solve. We found the

skeletons six years after they died. I don't think we had any clue even at the time of their disappearance. Nobody in this police station today was posted here eight years ago."

"You mean people have been transferred?"

"Some got promoted and moved out. Some got transferred. One of them retired also. Nobody wants to live in this miserable place."

"Is there anybody nearby who can help me with the story?" Seema said, ignoring his 'miserable place' remark. *Every government employee seems to have some complaint.*

"You can try meeting Sukh Ram Singh. The old man retired three years ago. Now lives in a village a few kilometers from here. He was posted here during the disappearances."

"Can you write down his address?"

As her cab took a narrow road towards village Barhi, Seema fought an urge to tell the driver to turn back and take her back to Jabalpur. A full day of running around places had frustrated her. She wondered what new clues would this small village in Chandia throw. Apprehensively, she looked out the window. Evening was about to fall. The surrounding jungles had begun darkening ominously. *I better hurry.*

The rustic smell of countryside India reached her nose and helped soothe her nerves. Her car was often stopped by herds of cows and goats heading back to their shelters. She saw people looking curiously at her and her car, as they moved across a road with small houses on both sides of it.

The driver talked to a passer-by and asked for Sukh Ram Singh's house. The man motioned towards a dilapidated house at the far end of the village.

As Seema got down from her car in front of Sukh Ram's house, she saw a couple of small children running towards her, curiously eyeing the madam from the city. A few women were peeping at her through their windows from the adjoining houses.

Sukh Ram Singh lived in a mud house with a thatched roof. A large haystack lay in a small courtyard beside it. The doors were open. Seema asked for Sukh Ram. An old lady in a sari told her to sit in the front room and called out the man's name.

An old man wearing thick spectacles came into the front room. His hair and moustache were completely white. He squinted on seeing Seema's unknown face. *I have disturbed this man's siesta.* She stood up and told him about her and her purpose. The man took a seat beside her and looked for a minute at the horizon visible from his door, as if he had been carried into some other world.

"I was waiting for someone to ask me about this case before I retire. You came three years late. But still I'm glad at least somebody came," the old man said with a feeble voice. "What I'm going to tell you is completely off the records. If you quote me, I'll deny ever meeting you. Is that agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Eight years ago, on the evening these kids disappeared, I was doing my night shift in the AJK Umaria Police Station. It must've been about 3 AM in the morning when I got a call from this man. He sounded hysterical and was in complete paranoia. He told me he had killed his friends. And somebody is after him. They were going to kill him."

Seema looked at him wide-eyed. This was news to her.

"Was it Kunal Chaubey?" she asked. He was the only one whose skeleton was not found.

"I think so. I didn't know then, because he didn't tell me his name. He was talking about murder and it was a serious matter, so I immediately called up the control room and told them to dispatch a team."

"Where was he calling from?"

"Some PCO booth on the outskirts of the national park area. That's what he told me."

"So what happened next?"

"The team took too long to reach. I guess about 2-3 hours. The man was not at the booth till they got there. He was gone."

There was an unsettling silence between Seema and the man for a minute.

Then Seema said, "This is shocking. What you're saying is nowhere in the investigation reports."

"Because there was nothing to suggest that the call I received that night pertained to this case."

"Ridiculous! It sounds highly relevant to this case."

"I think there was something fishy going on. Because when I told the sub-inspector next day about the call, he refused to believe me."

“Why would he refuse?”

“I had a condition,” he said and hesitated for a few seconds before continuing again, “Actually, I had a drinking problem. I would often come to the police station drunk. But I swear I was not drunk that night. Still, that fucking bastard was not ready to put my statement on record. It struck me that day and still continues to needle me that sub-inspector Neeraj Jaiswal knew something more about this case than me. The man is a DSP now, transferred to Andhra Pradesh.”

“Do you remember anything else which the caller might have told you?”

“Yes. And I have kept it for the last. There was one statement, which he made while blabbering on the phone. He said something about Dr. Chauhan. I don’t remember what exactly.”

The word ‘Doctor’ rang a bell in Seema’s mind. The Dean was talking about a psychiatrist. *Doctor.*

“Dr Chauhan? Is he a psychiatrist?”

“Why do you say so?”

“One of my sources said Kunal was in touch with a psychiatrist,” Seema said.

She looked at the man’s brooding face. He was silent; absorbed in his thoughts, as if trying to link this information to what he knew already.

He finally looked at Seema and said, “That makes it easy then.” His eyes were excited. “You know, even though no one was ready to go after this Dr Chauhan, I tried my hand at some personal investigation. I located four Dr. Chauhan’s in Jabalpur. But I didn’t know what to do with those names. I didn’t have any warrant. Neither did I have any support from my seniors. So, I didn’t go any further. But today, eight years later, I see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“How so?”

“Because only one of these doctors is a psychiatrist.”

It was completely dark by the time Seema came out of Sukh Ram’s house. But she was beaming with a renewed sense of optimism. She had a chit in her hand, which held the address of one Dr Avneesh Chauhan. She gave it to her driver.

Her cab began its return journey to Jabalpur. Besides the headlights of her car, there was no light anywhere else on the deserted road. The surroundings were painted in pitch black. A faint smell of burning coal hung in the air. She felt a little cold as the car made its way through a patch of road surrounded on both sides by the thick forests.

She was deep in her thoughts. *What can be the link between the skeletons case and the Nitin Tomar massacre, other than the gruesome murders obviously? Were these men acting as puppets in some grand play?* Somehow, this psychiatrist seemed to hold the only key to this case.

She was jolted out of her thoughts when her driver pushed the brakes all of a sudden. She almost hit her head on the front seat.

“What happened...” she stopped her sentence midway and stared in shock, when she saw a Toyota Innova standing in the middle of the road. Two men in army attire stood beside it, pointing guns at their car. Seema heard some movement behind her car. Through the rear windshield, she saw that one more man was standing near the boot. He was also holding a gun. A chill ran down her spine. She rolled up the rear windows and locked her door.

A bald man in sunglasses emerged from the Innova and started walking towards her car. He approached the driver’s side, pointing his gun at him. He was chewing gum.

“Miss Seema?” he asked.

“Yes?” Seema replied from behind the driver. She tried to look indifferent.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us,” the man said, opening the driver’s door. Before the driver could say anything, he grabbed his collar with one hand and pulled him out.

“*Kya hua sahib?*” The driver protested sheepishly.

“Stand outside!”

This was a sign of danger. She quickly took out her mobile phone. But before she could do anything with it, she saw herself staring down the barrel of a gun pointed at her.

“Open the door and move out!”

“Who are you? Do you know I am from the Press?” Seema asked with a shaky voice.

“I will say only once more,” the man barked. “Open the door and move out!”

Seema opened her door and came out. She sensed some movement behind her back. Before she could turn, she felt a palm around her mouth, gagging her. She struggled, trying to shout and break free. But her hands wouldn't move. Another man was holding her hands tightly.

They carried her and thrust her into the Innova's rear seat beside another man who was sitting there already. One of her captors entered after Seema, sandwiching her. From the tinted glass, she saw her cab driver pleading to the man in sunglasses. Before she could blink, the man in sunglasses shot the driver in the head. She tried to scream, but felt a hand around her mouth. With tears flowing from her eyes, she saw the two men dump the driver's body in the forest.

The man in sunglasses took the driver's seat of Seema's cab and drove it in the opposite direction.

As the Toyota Innova also started moving, a chilling realization began to trouble her. It might be her last day in this world. Only one face came into her mind.

Vidisha.

7:30 PM, GRAND TRUNK ROAD, AMBALA CITY

The warehouse of M/s Turbo Steels Pvt. Limited stood on a secluded road branching out from the Grand Trunk Road. Nothing usually moved on this road, except occasional trucks carrying steel bars to the warehouse. Even during the day, lush green fields of sugarcane and tall trees would conceal the movement of people and goods on this road from public view. In the darkness of the evening today, the road lay as silent as a graveyard. The nearest building, an abandoned car garage, was more than a kilometre away from the warehouse.

There was no chance that any onlooker would spot the car parked carefully behind this garage. Two people sat in the car since the last couple of hours, waiting for the evening to grow darker. In a minute, both of them came out of the car, holding torchlights in hands. They sneaked into the adjoining sugarcane field.

“You really think it’s a good idea?” Mrinal said, stooping low while negotiating his way through the sharp sugarcane leaves.

“Believe me. If there was a better option, I would’ve gone for it,” Prakash replied. “I’m just as scared as you are.”

A few hours ago, after parking their car, Prakash had checked-out the front side of the warehouse. Outside the entry gate, he saw a small room with a window. There seemed to be some movement inside the room suggesting the presence of one or two guards. They had probably locked the entry gate and remained outside. So, entry from the front gate was impossible.

The only remaining option was to enter from the back of the warehouse. To make things simpler, it bordered on the sugarcane fields, allowing for stealth.

“How are we going to get into the warehouse?” Mrinal whispered.

“We’ll find a way.”

Both of them walked in the dark sugarcane field trying hard not to stumble over a stump. It was a tough walk and took them about twenty minutes to cover the distance. The wall at the back of the warehouse greeted them with a foul smell of rotten food and urine. The grass was wet, slimy and littered with dirty polythene bags and beer bottles.

There was a large but rusty metal gate on the wall, which was locked tight with a thick iron chain. The sharp spear-shaped tops on the gate threatened to make climbing difficult. But these were exactly what Prakash thought they can hold on to while climbing.

Prakash put his ears on the metal gate to listen to any movement inside the building. *No movement.*

“I’ll climb first,” Prakash said.

He secured his right leg on the rough wall and the left on the metal gate. By giving a slight jerk to his body, he was able to catch hold of a pointed top. He pulled his body up while his legs and knees scraped on the wall. In a few seconds, he was finally standing on the wall. He took care not to cut himself with the sharp glass shards embedded on the wall top. Prakash studied the warehouse meticulously.

The warehouse compound comprised of a large open ground adjoining the wall and an enormous tin-roofed building, completely washed in darkness. A huge pile of long iron bars and rods was lying over the ground. Three trucks were standing beside this iron dump. The entry gate of the warehouse was to his left. *Let’s hope it’s locked.*

“Nobody seems to be there. As we expected,” Prakash said, looking down at Mrinal from the top. “I’m getting in.”

He used the support of the pointed tops to get down into the warehouse compound. He stood there till Mrinal also entered the compound in the same way.

“We should be getting a Pulitzer for what we are doing,” Mrinal said, while walking behind Prakash.

They crossed the iron dump yard and approached the tin-roofed building.

Prakash threw torchlight over the building. Three large door-less halls, connected by a corridor, came into view.

Two of the halls were packed to the rafters with long iron rods and bars, protruding almost halfway down the corridor's breadth. Prakash checked out the two halls one by one. Mrinal followed him closely. After the fiasco at Afroz's house, Mrinal seemed careful not to remain very far from Prakash. There was nothing of any importance in these rooms.

They walked towards the third hall. It seemed vacant from a distance, but as they got in, a nauseating stench of human urine and faeces hit their nostrils.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Prakash said, flashing the torchlight inside the hall. He was both surprised and scared to see what was in front of him.

There were three empty metallic cages at the far end of the hall. Each cage was about six feet tall and three feet wide. The grills were made up of cast iron rods, like the ones they saw in the other rooms. As they came closer to the cages, they could see thick metal chains lying inside. A white powder was strewn on the floor of the cages. From its smell, Prakash figured out it was bleaching powder. He had an eerie feeling about the cages.

"Seems like we're in the right place," Prakash whispered, swallowing.

"Look at that," Mrinal squeaked with a horrified face. He was pointing at the floor of the corner-most cage.

What Prakash saw made his hair stand on end. *Blood.*

"Let's get the hell out of here," Mrinal said, almost getting into a sprint.

"Wait!" Prakash said, throwing his light beam at a corner. "There seems to be another room."

Washed in the light, a metallic door came into view. It was not locked, but shut simply with a large latch.

"We have to check this out," he continued.

"Hurry up, then. I don't want to find myself in those cages."

Prakash opened the latch and pushed the door carefully, not making any sound. He flashed the torch around. The room was about half the size of the bigger rooms. At exactly the mouth of the room, there was a desktop computer on a table beside a large steel almirah.

"Take out the hard drive," Prakash said.

Mrinal nodded and got down to work.

Prakash moved inwards. There were various cartons lying on the floor. He pored over each of them. Most were filled with hardware parts. One of the cartons piqued his interest. It was a plastic carton, unlike the others, which were made of paper. He opened its flaps and looked inside. It contained a video camera, a few tripods, some lighting equipment and a black robe and mask. *Home run.*

“I have found what we were looking for,” Prakash whispered. He lifted the video camera and showed it to Mrinal.

“Oh my God! This is good,” he said. “But I am stuck with this desktop. The CPU box is locked with a strong bolt. It won’t open. Why don’t...” Mrinal went silent all of a sudden.

The sound of a vehicle reached their ears. It had pulled over outside the entry gate.

“Bloody hell! Let’s run,” Prakash said, rushing towards the door. Mrinal was already outside.

They made their way past the cages and came out of the hall into the corridor. The metallic sound of a lock being opened echoed in the silence.

The main gate is opening. Shit!

There was no way they were going to escape. The only option was hiding. As the main door opened, they ran into one of the large halls containing the iron rods. The heap was large enough to hide two people. Both Prakash and Mrinal were now crouched behind the metal heap. In complete darkness.

A vehicle got inside the compound and stopped. Prakash could hear a few men getting down and dragging someone out, who was crying in pain. A *man!* The wails of the man intensified in a few seconds. It seemed the other men were hauling him across the corridor. A realization made Prakash shudder. *They are taking him to the cages.*

The victim kept on crying and wailing as they dragged him into the adjoining hall. His cries stopped all of a sudden after a loud shriek. Prakash winced. Mrinal caught his shoulder. *Did they just kill him?*

Prakash heard footsteps moving towards their hall. *Shit.* The men stopped at the opening of their hall and started smoking. He tried hard to listen to what they were saying. Their words were barely audible. All he could gather were a few words – ‘...got the bastard after 8 years’ and the name ‘Kunal Chaubey’.

BOOK 2

The Mussoorie Diversion Road in Dehradun gives a breath-taking view of lush green valleys and hills to travellers. While driving down the road comprising of numerous estates and hotel resorts, one can almost miss a quaint and silent estate named Jayanti Greens. A closer look on its perimeter however, suggests an unusually secure and protected campus. The estate is protected by thick walls, with barbwire passing over its top and a few smooth wires running parallel to them. Garbage collectors often find rotting carcasses of crows, squirrels and sparrows in a dustbin kept along the wall. 'Poor creatures', they moan. 'They touched the smooth wires.'

No structure inside the compound is visible from outside with thick rows of deodar and mango trees obstructing the view of curious onlookers. The campus houses a two-storied sprawling mansion with CCTVs mounted at strategic positions.

Jayanti Greens is owned by the Kushwaha family, which runs one of the largest private security companies in India. Bastion Corp provides security services to a large number of corporations, industrial installations, construction sites, hotels and even to political parties. It also provides need-based security to people who can afford its high price tag. Its clientele has often included visiting celebrities, sports stars, business tycoons and politicians.

The patriarch of the family, Tejeshwar Kushwaha, stood on the balcony on the backside of his mansion, with a grim face. His wrinkled face and a set

of deep lines running on his forehead made him look way older than his sixty-nine years. He was so thin that his dazzling-white kurta-pyjamas and waistcoat fluttered unimpeded in the gentle breeze.

The man was rarely seen in public, but was highly regarded and often feared in the inner circles of business and politics. It had taken about three generations of Kushwahas to build that reputation, and he hoped he would see its pinnacle soon.

It was dark outside but he did not bother getting the lights turned on. He loved the view of the hills far away in the darkness and the twinkling lights of vehicles moving on narrow roads over them. The hills looked like giants in front of the tiny vehicles; mercifully letting them move and pass. He sometimes felt the same about himself. A man who pulls the strings from above while the world moves.

He looked at his watch. His elder son Vinod was about to arrive. They would be meeting after almost a year. Not for family bonding, but for business. He had slowly handed over the reins to his son's Vinod and Adesh. However, things had not gone that smoothly. Bastion Corp was doing well, no doubt, because of the heightened need for private security after the on-going spate of terror attacks on the country. Had it been their real business, he would have felt good about it. But his sons needed to understand that their family's real business was power and influence. They had to protect it and earn more of it. Like he had done till now. And to do that, he knew he would have to remind his sons again what the Kushwahas stood for.

He was proud that he had witnessed the evolution of his family business from mere 'guns for hire' and professional assassins to political power brokers. As he stood in the dark, his mind went over the four decades he had spent at the helm of affairs.

He had received a fledgling organization from his father, with the Marwaris as their major customers. They had hired them to protect their tea estates in West Bengal where a rebellion among the proletariat was brewing. The Kushwahas were used to assassinate a lot of their leaders and crush the uprising, which unfortunately didn't happen. Tejeshwar was not happy with these low-end operations. He wanted to be at the centre of power. That meant spreading their tentacles in Delhi.

The power circles in Delhi at that time were in serious need of some firepower and muscle. They accepted the Kushwahas with open arms. The

country was going through a construction boom. New industries were coming up. Land was scarce and often needed to be acquired through force. That's where the Kushwahas came handy.

Tejeshwar build a loyal set of clients, who used his services quite often. Many businessmen, leaders and social activists would later die; some would vanish overnight. Political parties would blame each other and neighbouring countries, while the puppeteer behind the scenes, Tejeshwar, would march on with a smile.

He was a clever man. To stay clear of the law enforcement authorities, he wanted to give a legitimate face to his business. It resulted in Bastion Corp, one of the early private security companies of the country. Behind the veneer Bastion Corp, the dark business of the Kushwaha family flourished.

He hired ex-army men, mercenaries and professional killers, and provided them with the best of equipment and training. Average performers would find themselves in Bastion Corp; while the best of the best would go on to become professional assassins. This business was not for the light hearted. There was no going back once the men accepted the dark world. Misfits and the apologetic would often vanish, purged mercilessly.

Over the years, Tejeshwar built contacts with private military organizations and mercenaries across the world and supplied them with people. His men were hired by the militia in Sierra Leone and Yugoslavia. Private military companies like Blackwater employed his men on contract during the gulf war to guard their oil exploits and reconstruction business. In India, RAW, the external intelligence agency used the Kushwaha men for their black-ops in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Today, they had the capability of arm-twisting governments in South-Asia. Their power in India was spread like cancer – in the government, law-enforcing authorities, business and even in smaller cities. Every businessman and politician who saw an unprecedented and surprising rise owed something to their family. Yet nobody took their name in public discussions. Officially, there was no such family or organization.

Tejeshwar heard footsteps behind him. His bodyguard Dara Singh walked into the balcony.

“Vinod *Bhai* has arrived,” the man said.

“Send him here,” Tejeshwar said without turning around. “And switch on the lights”.

Tejeshwar knew that if his son was here to discuss business, it must have been something important. Their business from private military companies had seen a dip over the years, with the US planning to move out from Iraq and Afghanistan. There was also a backlash against private military forces worldwide and they were being seen as mercenaries not bound by any law. That was not good for business. The world needed new wars and he knew it. The action was in Asia. Islamic extremism was claiming new territories. *They would need our support.*

But he was often anxious about Vinod's vision for their future, because it differed a lot from his own. Tejeshwar accepted the fact that every son in his family had often discarded the vision of his father and then gone on to find his own way.

But Vinod's thoughts were so radically different that he was left worried. His son wanted the family to expand into the business of 'specialized' weapons. His vision was that in future, it would matter little who carried the weapon. What would matter is the weapon. That was a fundamentally different thought from his ancestors, who had believed in letting the best man do the job.

Tejeshwar knew he would not survive to see which direction his family takes. He had sent his other son Adesh for military training the same way he had done for himself and Vinod. He wondered what ideas that lad would bring. *Better leave some things to destiny.*

He sensed someone standing behind. He turned around. It was Vinod.

The old man studied his son. He looked different. The last time they met, his son had short hair. Today, he walked in with slick black, long hair drooping over his eyes like a waterfall. His throat was bonier and lips unusually dark. *When will he stop smoking?*

"You have become so thin, father," Vinod said with a smile and hugged him.

"So have you. Doing too much work, eh?" Tejeshwar said, patting on his shoulder. "You must sometimes devote some time to the fairer sex also."

"I am, nowadays." Vinod winked.

"What makes you visit me so urgently in the night?"

"There is a lucrative party from Iran. The Quds Force. They are planning a mission in India," he said looking straight into the eyes of his father. "We need to talk."

9:30 PM, AMBALA CITY

Prakash's back was aching now. He had been squatting in pitch darkness since an hour. The visitors had left the warehouse, locking it again. But Mrinal and he had decided to wait for some time before moving out. From the corner of his eyes, now adapted to the darkness, he could see the silhouette of Mrinal sitting beside him. He wondered what the guy was thinking.

"Shall we call the police?" Mrinal whispered.

"Not until our lives are in danger," Prakash replied. "I want to see what these people are up to."

"Once we are in danger, we might not live long enough to call the police."

That's true, thought Prakash, but decided to ignore him. He knew that ideally they should be calling the police. A crime had been committed or was to be committed. But the journalist in him implored him to wait and unravel the whole mystery first. He was too close to regress now. If they called the police, these foot soldiers would be charged with a minor felony and then let go on bail. *That would be frustrating.*

He was curious to check out the man in the adjoining room, who had not made any sound since then.

"I'm going to check out the cages. Need to find out who's the guy," Prakash whispered. "You move out of this place. Be there in our car."

"Don't be crazy. They'll kill you if they catch you."

“I have done this before. So don’t worry,” Prakash said, trying to assure him. But the truth was, he had never dared to do such a thing in past.

“Then I’ll wait here in this room till you come back,” Mrinal protested.

“No. You have to move out. At least one of us should be safe,” he argued. “To call for outside help if needed.”

Mrinal thought for a moment and then said OK. It sounded logical.

Both of them moved out of their hiding place, careful not to stumble on the iron rods and make any noise. Once they were on the ground, Prakash gave a thumbs-up signal to Mrinal to move on. He stood there as he saw Mrinal climb over the back gate and then get down on the other side.

He now lighted his torch and walked into the ‘cage’ room. He saw a body lying on the floor of the first cage, facing the backside wall. His slender body was covered with a yellow T-Shirt splotted with bloodstains and a pair of tattered blue jeans. He had curly hair, radiating from his scalp like strands of coir. The man’s hands were tied behind his back with induction tape. *Is he dead or alive?*

“Hey, are you OK?” he whispered to the man.

No response.

After asking the same thing thrice, he saw some movement in the man’s body. He groaned, waking up from unconsciousness. With great effort, he turned his body towards Prakash and got into a sitting position. His face was smeared with dried up blood and mouth had been taped.

Before the man could say anything, Prakash pressed a finger on his lips and said, “Shhh. I am not one of them... If you agree not to make any sound, I will untie you.”

The prisoner nodded and wriggled towards the grill. He grimaced as Prakash removed the sticky tape from his mouth. Then he turned around, projecting his tied hands towards him.

But Prakash did not untie him. *Not so soon.*

“First tell me who you are,” he said. “Then I’ll do something about this tape.”

The prisoner turned around to face him again. He kept looking at Prakash with a frown, studying him.

“Look. I’m a journalist. I’ve been following these men for long,” Prakash said, trying to convince him. “I can help you.”

“Why have you been following them?” The man finally spoke. His voice

was croaky.

Prakash weighed his options. *How much should I tell him?*

“I am investigating a case. You know about Nitin Tomar, the murderer of eleven children?”

“He is dead.”

“You know about it, then. My investigation has led me to this place. Now, are you going to tell me who you are... or do you want me to leave you here just like that?”

“My name is Kunal Chaubey. I think I can help you with some answers.”

“You know something about the Nitin Tomar case?”

“I know things which will make your jaws drop,” he said. “But first let me out.”

Prakash wanted to interrogate him further, but it struck him that he was in enemy land. *Need to move.* He sliced the tape behind Kunal and studied the lock in the grill. It was a large padlock. *Will take time to saw it and cut.*

“I will have to cut the lock,” Prakash said, taking out his Swiss knife. It had a small saw in it. He started sawing on the shackle.

It took about half an hour for the shackle to be cut. Prakash’s hands were quivering with fatigue. Cautiously, he swivelled the cage door to let Kunal out. He was walking with a limp.

“Can you climb?” Prakash asked, eyeing his hurt legs.

“Yes. With some help.”

Both of them hurried towards the backside door of the warehouse. Prakash told Kunal to climb first. He propped him up to let him hold the pointed tops. The metal door creaked under Kunal’s weight. With a thrust he reached its top.

There was a noise on the front gate of warehouse. Someone was coming.

“We need to move out fast,” Prakash said in panic. “Hurry!”

Kunal ignored his pain and jumped over to the other side.

It was now Prakash’s turn. Not a second was to be wasted. The front gate of the warehouse was opening. He hauled himself up the door and jumped to the other side.

The next moment, he heard someone shout and raise an alarm.

The duo dashed into the sugarcane field. Kunal was running with a limp,

trying to catch-up with Prakash.

As Prakash approached the place where they had parked their car, he yelled, "Start it, Mrinal! They are coming!"

Mrinal started the car and both of them quickly entered it. *Go. Go. Go.* He pushed the accelerator and they sped off. Prakash looked at the rear-view mirror. He saw the headlights of a car coming towards them.

"They are after us and closing in!" Prakash yelled. "Drive fast."

He thought about the places where they can go before their pursuers caught up with them. Wandering into a side-alley could throw up a dead end and they might get cornered. The best defence seemed to be in getting into a residential area and abandoning the car.

"Let's get into a busy area where we can disappear into an alley," Prakash said.

Mrinal kept driving at a high speed, keeping the followers in pursuit. The car was now in an area with a lot of commercial and residential buildings on both sides of the road. He took a sudden left in an alley and kept going.

"I don't know where I am going," Mrinal muttered.

Prakash didn't say anything. *I don't have any better ideas.*

Mrinal zipped through a maze of interconnecting bylanes and avenues. They were surrounded by flats and apartment buildings now. Prakash looked behind. Their pursuers were no longer in view.

They got into a dark alley with barely enough space for two vehicles to pass side-by-side.

"Let's stop here and get out," Prakash suggested. "We can hide in the basement of one of these houses."

Mrinal slowed down in response. But before he could stop the car, his face was flooded with the light from a car coming from the opposite direction. The man sitting on the front passenger seat looked like a walrus, his long moustache drooping beyond his jaws. He had projected his hand out of the window, holding a pistol.

Their pursuers had showed up right on their faces. *Shit!*

"Don't stop!" Prakash screamed at the top of his voice. "Even if you hit their car, don't stop!"

Mrinal pushed the accelerator hard, keeping their car to the left side of the road. A collision seemed unavoidable. But at the last moment, the other car veered to their right. The bodies of the two vehicles sheared against each

other, with headlights and mirrors getting smashed. Mrinal did not lift his legs from the pedal till their car had completely moved clear of the other car.

In their rear-view mirror, they could see their pursuers stopping their car. Walrus-man opened his door and rushed out clutching his arm. He was hurt from the collision, but still aimed his pistol at their car. Mrinal pushed the throttle to its maximum in response. The man fired two shots before they were out of his view.

No one from the trio uttered a word till they had driven for a few minutes. “Are you alright, Mrinal?” Prakash asked, his voice stuttering.

Mrinal nodded. His hands on the steering were trembling.

“And you?” Prakash asked Kunal, turning around.

“Got saved by inches,” Kunal said, holding a puff of foam in his hand. There was a gaping hole in the rear seat.

There was bright light everywhere. Seema tried opening her eyes, but they burned. She was lying flat on the cold marble floor. As she tried to lift her torso, a throbbing pain inside her head made her dizzy. *Have they drugged me?*

With some struggle, she made herself sit and then studied the room. It was cubical in shape with a low-height ceiling. Everything was white – the walls, the ceiling, the air-conditioning ducts, the floor and even the door. The room was filled with an overpowering, almost blinding dazzle. It was as if a halogen-lamp had been lit inside a room made of mirrors.

Her eyes paused at a small white-coloured cylindrical device mounted at a corner of the ceiling.

A fucking camera! I'm being observed!

Roshni Lodge was a small dingy hotel they found in one of the alleys leading up to the Grand Trunk Road. Prakash looked at the building. The first floor seemed devoid of any lights, suggestive of vacant rooms. While he went to its reception, Mrinal took off with the car in search for a place to hide it. Prakash booked one of the bigger rooms to accommodate all three of them. He also told the receptionist to order dinner for them.

In about fifteen minutes, all three were inside their room. There were two beds, with stained and yellowed bed sheets lying over them. An additional mattress was tucked into a wooden almirah. It felt damp and smelled of cigarette smoke. In a moment, they realized that even the curtains, the sheets and the bathroom, reeked of cigarette smoke.

Bloody hell! What was it? A smoking room? Prakash walked towards the lone window in the room and opened it to let in some air. He looked down. The road below was dark and silent. *No vehicles.* He wondered where they would run if cornered. He turned around and looked at Mrinal and Kunal. They looked shell-shocked, sitting on one of the beds and staring at the floor.

“Where did you park the car?” he asked Mrinal.

“Found a dark alley.”

“Did you cover it with something?”

“Yes Sir! I covered it,” Mrinal replied with a touch of anger and irritation in his voice.

Prakash said nothing. Mrinal had good reasons to be worked up.

“I’m sorry for putting you through all this,” Prakash said apologetically. “I’ll ensure you leave safely tomorrow morning.”

“I’m going nowhere till I hear this man out,” Mrinal spat, pointing towards Kunal, who lifted his head up.

Prakash eyed Kunal with a questioning look. *Spill your guts buddy. We don’t have all night here.*

“You guys have won a terrific bunch of enemies now,” Kunal mocked.

“Who are these men?” Prakash asked. “Who are you?”

“Where should I begin?” Kunal closed his eyes for a few moments, diving into an abyss of memories.

Then he began, “You must have heard stories of people going berserk and massacring innocents. Happens in the United States most of the times. The Virginia Tech massacre in 2007 for example. A student carries a gun to his college. Kills 32 people in cold blood. Two years prior to that, in a similar incident in Minnesota, a 16-year old kid killed his family at home and then drove his grandfather's police vehicle to his school. He killed seven people. I remember another incident in Connecticut in 2012. A 20-year old kid first shoots his mother. Then he goes to his school and massacres 26 people. Guess what’s common between these incidents, other than the fact that they were cold blooded massacres?”

Prakash was filled with a sense of foreboding. He looked at Mrinal’s face, which looked sombre.

“How do you know so much about these incidents,” Mrinal interjected.

“Because I’ve been a part of one such incident.”

Mrinal shivered. He did not dare ask the next question. Prakash did the job.

“You were an eyewitness, a survivor or...”

“I was the killer.”

Prakash looked at him in silence. Holding his breath, he said, “You can carry on. I can’t make any guesses at the beginning of a story.”

“OK,” Kunal said calmly. “What’s common between these incidents is that the killer in each case was on anti-depressant drugs prescribed by psychiatrists. Some of these drugs have a history of inducing violent behaviour. A few have also been linked to homicides and suicides.”

“So you’re saying that these incidents resulted from depressed people taking some psychiatric medication?” Prakash asked.

“Yes. The Virginia Tech shooter was on Varenicline, a drug eleven times more likely than other drugs to induce violence. So was the Minnesota killer. The Connecticut shooter was also suspected to be on an anti-depressant.”

“You pop a pill and then shoot people! Just like that?”

“It wasn’t that simple earlier. You needed to be severely depressed to become violent. You needed to have a history of stimulation with violent video games, movies and news of massacres.”

“That’s scary. But what do you mean by ‘earlier’?”

“It means that now some people have created drugs which can induce extremely violent behaviour in a very spontaneous manner. A couple of hours is what takes the drug to result in homicidal tendencies. You will have terrible dreams where you cannot realize what’s real and what’s not. And you need not have a history of exposure to violence. A small external stimulus is all it takes to turn into a killer.”

“What kind of stimulus?”

“It can be anything. A malevolent thought buried in your mind, a gossip on some violent happening, a sudden reminiscence of a bloody incident in the past.... Even a picture or a poster depicting violence.”

Prakash was stunned. *What is this world coming to?* He recalled that Nitin Tomar was also seeing a psychiatrist. A chilling realization began taking shape in his mind.

“Did Nitin Tomar also take such a medication?”

“What Nitin Tomar took was a drug about hundred times more potent than Varenicline or Fluoxetine. They call it NB-67.”

“More than a hundred times! That’s... that’s terrifying,” Prakash exclaimed. “If what you are saying is true, then this drug accounts for Nitin’s behaviour that day. He was seen chatting happily with other teachers a few hours before the killings. The drug turned him into a demon. But isn’t it illegal? How can such a drug be available in the market?”

“The drug is not in the market. It cannot come into market unless it is approved by the drug regulating authority of a country. In US, it’s the FDA. For us, it is the Drugs Controller General of India,” Kunal said. “NB-67 is a molecule under research. And Nitin was a guinea pig.”

“You mean Nitin was a clinical trial subject?”

Prakash had a fair understanding of clinical trials. He had once done a story on how the huge pharmaceutical companies conduct clinical trials in

India without fully complying with the regulations. Many a time, it led to patient deaths through severe side effects and adverse events.

As per the law, before a medicine is brought out into the market, it has to be proved that it is safe to use and effective to treat the medical condition in a specific category of human population. For that, the molecule is first tested on animals, the process being known as a pre-clinical trial. If it is successful in animals, the molecule is then tested on human subjects. This process is known as a clinical trial.

“He must have been told so by his psychiatrist,” Kunal said. “In reality, it was a completely illegal activity. In an authentic clinical trial, one needs to spontaneously give details of any adverse event, that is, any harmful side effect to the drug regulating authority. But no such thing happened in this case. The people behind this drug were running their clinical trials knowing exactly what the drug was going to do to the subjects.”

“Why do you say so? It might have been a mistake on their part which they are now trying to hide.”

“I say so because they tested it on me eight years ago. They clearly saw the deadly results, but didn’t stop at that. They tried it many times after that, on different people, with possibly enhanced potency of the drug. The latest is the case of Nitin Tomar.”

“What did you do eight years ago?”

“I slaughtered three of my friends in Bandhavgarh National Park. We had gone there for a party at night. I was on NB-67, administered to me by a psychiatrist named Dr Avneesh Chauhan. The drug did not have any immediate effect on me. But in an hour or so, I started feeling dazed. I still don’t remember exactly why I attacked my friends. There was a point when I saw terrible dreams with my eyes open – demons trying to take me into another world. I tried to resist and break free but couldn’t. I had to kill them. One by one.”

No one said anything for a full minute. The atmosphere in the room suddenly felt suffocating, as if the lingering smell of smoke had got into their brains.

“When did you come back to your senses?” Prakash asked.

“I found myself lying beside a boulder the next morning. A bloody axe was lying near me. Having only a fleeting memory of what I might have done, I rushed back to the place where we had built our bonfire. I saw blood

everywhere. Flies were buzzing over large patches of blackish clotted blood,” Kunal said, closing his eyes in regret.

He added a few moments later, “But shockingly, I found no bodies. I wondered whether I had buried them somewhere, but couldn’t recollect at all. I sat there and wept, feeling disgusted with myself. Felt like committing suicide. Somehow I managed to reach the place where we had hidden our bikes. Guess what I saw? There were no bikes either.”

“Are you saying that the whole incident was a clinical trial?”

“Yes. They were watching me, monitoring me. They wanted to see the impact of NB-67 on people. When the killings were done, they disposed off the bodies and took away our bikes.”

“Did you see anyone following you or watching you that night?”

“After days of wracking my brain, I recalled a small incident which had gone unnoticed that night. A shining object had momentarily caught the beam of Ratan’s torchlight in the jungle. He said it seemed to be a person wearing a goggle. We brushed off his statement. I thought it must have been an owl or some animal. Later, I realized that it must have been a man wearing night-vision equipment.”

“This is shocking. Who are these people?”

“I don’t know. I tried to locate Dr Avneesh Chauhan. He had been referred to me by another doctor. But I never found this Avneesh guy again. He was gone.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“Because I was shot at by these people,” Kunal said, gritting his teeth in anger. “I was feeling extremely guilty. So the night after the killings, I called up the local Police station from an STD booth. The man told me to wait till the police came to pick me up.”

He continued, “I waited for an hour. I saw a van stop at a distance. The men who came out of it were in army attire, but looked dangerous. One of them located me and they started running after me. Wary of their intentions, I ran into the jungle. They kept firing while chasing me. One of the slugs got me in the thigh. But I didn’t stop. I kept running till I was completely lost from them. I never again attempted to call the police.”

“So, these people tried to finish you off because their experiment was done.”

“Yes.”

“You said that you know of many more such experiments?”

“Over these eight years, I have followed many such incidents where there has been a massacre and the killer goes missing or is dead. For example, random killings in schools, colleges and in the military, unexplained violence at home, incidents like those. I found a partner in a psychiatrist named Dr Kalyan Ghosh. He had a history of activism against big pharmaceutical companies whose drugs had serious side effects. I found his name in a newspaper article and contacted him. He was stunned on hearing my account. Together, we decided to expose these people and began investigating. Over the years, we came across a few cases where NB-67 or its more potent successor could have been used,” said Kunal and took a deep breath. “But, somehow the wrong guys got wind of what we were trying to do. Since then, both of us are living in mortal fear.”

“Where does Dr Kalyan Ghosh live?”

“I don’t know. He went into hiding about two years ago, fearing for his life. In recent times, he used to live in a state of constant paranoia, rarely sharing any detail with me. If he is alive, I guess he would be investigating independently now.”

Prakash looked into Kunal’s eyes. “You have really gone through terrible times. It’s tough imagining me in your place.”

Mrinal chipped in with his own question. “So how did you come across the Nitin Tomar case?”

“I wasn’t aware of the Nitin Tomar massacre till it actually happened. The death of Mohammed Afroz and the Mujahid hogwash prompted me to come to Ambala and do some research on my own. But these bastards got me.”

Prakash nodded and said, “We also suspected Mujahid-e-Bashariyat of being a phoney outfit.”

“Yeah. That’s an easy way to hide their footprints. Blame it on the Jihadi,” Kunal said.

“Does the name Dr Varun Gupta ring any bell?” Prakash asked. “He was Nitin Tomar’s psychiatrist.”

“No. But I am sure the name is a fake. Who knows, he might be the same guy who gave me NB-67.”

“A psychiatrist with different names – Avneesh Chauhan, Varun Gupta...”

“Yes.”

Prakash shook his head in disbelief. He looked at Mrinal who seemed lost. He himself felt dizzy with all this information.

“One final question,” he said. “Who are these people? What is their motive?”

“That’s what I am trying to find out. Our pursuers are small fish. They don’t know who their bosses are. We need to find out the big fish and what exactly do they want to achieve with NB-67.”

“We will,” Prakash said. *But first I need to verify your story.*

He walked towards the window, took out his mobile phone and googled ‘Bandhavgarh mass murders Kunal Chaubey’.

Aurangzeb Road in Lutyens' Delhi, like the famous Kensington Palace Gardens of London, is often hailed as the richest road in India. The Birlas, Mittals, Jindals, Goenkas and some of the wealthiest people in the country have their 'crown jewel' properties in this part of the city. Their mansions stand in pride behind tall walls and hedges, comfortably secured from the much-detested world of common people.

But there are exceptions everywhere. Even on Aurangzeb Road.

One of the bungalows on the road is quite awkwardly named as Dharavi, the notorious slum in Mumbai, ridiculing the snobbery of the neighbours. The owner of the house probably wanted to remind the world of his origins.

The property is owned by the maverick business magnate named Anwar Shah, owner of the Centennium Group. With a combined turnover of more than \$30 billion, it is one of the largest privately owned enterprises in India.

Century Corp is the media arm of Centennium Group, running a couple of film studios and a news channel, Century News, under the 'Century' banner. Anwar never wanted to carry a news channel under his belt. It didn't fit well with his empire and also needed a different mindset to run. Besides, the margins were low and the competition was cut throat.

Century News was a part of Centennium Group only because of his sister, Diya Shah who was fascinated with an ailing news channel named *Sacchi Awaz*, run by some of the most respected journalists in the country. At one time, the channel used to be famous for its hard-hitting news and unbiased

commentary, but slowly lost out to the new generation *masala* news channels. Anwar bought the news channel as a gift for her, not expecting any returns from the company. It was a toy for his kid sister to play with.

But quite contrary to his expectations, Diya turned around the news channel under its new name – Century News and it became one of the most popular news channels of India. It often swept the key prizes in award ceremonies for journalism.

Nonetheless, the fourth estate can rarely stay away from a crisis. Century News was going through one today. Its star reporter Seema Sharma had vanished while working on one of the stories. Diya was worried because in this profession, people who disappear often turned up later in body bags. She was upset with herself for not asking Seema in detail about her activities. She had probably come across some explosive revelations while working on the Nitin Tomar case. *What have you got yourself into? Where would I look for you now?*

She was sitting in her brother's private study, waiting for one of his early morning business meetings to end. She knew she was a bitch as a boss. But to her own surprise she had a compassionate heart for people who worked under her. Seema was a fighter who had helped Century News reach where it was today. She deserved to get some help.

"Why is my private study looking so wonderful today?" said Anwar, as he strode into the room with a broad smile. He opened his arms for Diya. "It has been so long since you stepped into this house."

She hugged him.

"You know, I still miss your cooking," he said. "Now that you are here, I'll give my chefs a day off."

"Sure, *bhaiya*," Diya said, smiling.

"Now tell me. What pressing need brings you here?"

Her face grew serious. "You know why I am here. Don't you?"

"One of your employees has disappeared."

"Her name is Seema, our ace reporter. I think she rankled some anti-social elements while working on a story. She was last seen in a village near the Bandhavgarh forests in Madhya Pradesh."

"Which story?"

"The Nitin Tomar case... the man killed a dozen children in cold blood. He himself was murdered a week ago. She was probably trying to find out

who killed him.”

“You want me to help her family?”

“I don’t think she’s dead yet. You’ll have to help me find her.”

Diya looked at her brother. He was thinking.

“You surprise me sometimes, my little sister,” Anwar began, with an incredulous look on his face. “Diya, you remember what our father used to say sometimes? That my daughter would supersede my son in business. I couldn’t agree more. And look today, it’s me who is running this empire. You wanted to take a backseat. You wanted to pursue what your heart said. You’ve always been like that. Using your heart instead of your brain.”

He asked abruptly, “You know how many chemical plants we have?”

“18. Maybe 19,” Diya replied.

“25. We have 25 chemical plants employing more than ten thousand people. Every year, a few of them are lost to industrial accidents. It is unavoidable in hazardous businesses. We have insurance in place to take care of such situations. The reason why I’m telling you this is that an employer cannot keep running around to take care of every employee.”

“Seema is not just another employee. She has given my company a lot. Besides, she is a widow and has a little daughter. I can’t leave her amid the wolves.”

“What makes you think she’s alive?”

“She might not be. But I won’t sleep without ensuring I’ve done everything possible to bring her back.”

“What do you want from me, Diya?”

“Use your contacts. Use your power. Pull some levers.”

Anwar made a brooding face. He seemed to be exploring options.

“I’m going to call up a few top law enforcement officials. Let’s see what they can do.”

Diya nodded. *At least that’s a start.*

“But promise me one thing. You’re not going to personally get into Seema’s investigation. These people look dangerous. You better stay away from them.”

“OK.”

Seema opened her eyes and winced, trying to fight the brightness piercing her eyes. She remembered passing out with nausea some time back. How long ago, she didn't remember. *Maybe hours, maybe days.* She felt a cold sensation on her right hand. It turned out to be a handcuff, fastened to a shackle protruding from the floor.

Her eyes caught the figure of someone standing in front of her. It was an old man; tall and lean, his head almost touching the low height ceiling. He was wearing rimless glasses and was dressed impressively – a jet black suit, spotless white shirt and shiny black shoes.

“Mrs Seema. One of the top journalists of India. How does it feel to be caged like an animal?” the man sneered with a slightly nasal voice. His face bore an intellectual look, accentuated by his French cut beard and greying hair, which had retreated enough to make his temple look broader.

“So you're the bastard who got me kidnapped?”

“Impressive statement. I expected a more common question from you, like ‘Where am I?’ or ‘Who are you?’ But now that you have asked me a different question, let me answer it like this...,” he said with a flowing language and a condescending tone, as if conducting an orchestra. “You're not kidnapped. You are dead. Dead, the moment you entered this facility. The powers that be, wanted you dead immediately. But I convinced them of your value. You can be such an important subject for our... projects.”

Seema was confused. “Who are you?”

“That’s the last thing you should be worried about... considering that you are about to go through a ... transformative experience,” he said with a cunning smile. “I am usually called by the name Doctor.”

“Dr Avneesh Chauhan?”

“Oh! You have done your research. But unfortunately, you kicked a hornet’s nest with your little curiosity and look where it brought you,” the Doctor said. “To answer your question, Dr Avneesh Chauhan is only a name. Just a channel for me to get access to subjects.”

“What kind of subjects?”

“Subjects for our clinical trials,” he said. Seeing her confused and at sea, he smiled and continued, “Ohhh... I’m so sorry. You don’t know what’s happening, do you? That’s good. That mitigates the risk of you telling someone else about all this. Let me now explain to you in very simple words what’s happening. We are testing a molecule on humans.”

“Molecule?”

“Yes. A molecule, which has now been achieved as a drug, both in solid and liquid formulations. We call it NB-67. What does it do? It makes you dream. Simple.” His smile widened. “Actually, it makes you fear. It makes you feel threatened. To a point that you can no longer escape. So you react. You react with the primeval instincts of the human species. You attack your enemy and finish him off. NB-67 wakes up the inner demons in you, buried in the recesses of your mind.”

Seema’s stomach started churning. She could feel herself being consumed by a terrible sense of fear. *Inner Demons. Are Nitin Tomar’s actions and Bandhavgarh killings related to NB-67?*

“You look lost. Won’t you ask me why you’re here?” the Doctor questioned. “You’re here as a trial subject. The plan is to administer you with NB-67 and then monitor you. There are lingering problems with the efficacy of this drug. It’s quite selective. Almost at a genetic level. Many a time when the subject is on NB-67, the results are not as we like them to be. The drug fails to express itself and subject is unaffected. We are still trying to remove all such deficiencies in the drug. But don’t worry. In case we fail to see the desired effect in you, we’ll do something to make the game interesting.”

“Son-of-a-bitch. You’re going to rot in hell,” Seema screamed. She tried to grab the man’s collar, but was restrained by her shackles.

“Good to see you behave like that,” the man said, laughing. “It’s going to

help us.”

“I’m finally getting what you bastards are up to. What you’re doing to me, you did to Nitin Tomar and Kunal Chaubey also. They were depressed. They were fighting with life. And you guys approached them with phony psychiatrists and administered them with your drug. They murdered innocents and you watched them. That must have been your eureka moment. Isn’t it?”

“Phony psychiatrists! That’s an insult, my dear,” he said. “Ever heard these words from the Bhagavad Gita? – ‘I am become death, the destroyer of worlds!’... There was only one psychiatrist. Me. I’m the father of this drug. It’s me who finds the subjects. It’s me who tells them to consume it. It has been only me all the way.”

“You’ve betrayed the trust of your patients...”

“Every drug has some side effect. So does every big mission.”

“What’s your mission?”

“That’s none of your business. You aren’t going to endure our trial anyways.”

Seema’s eyes started to swell with tears. She thought about Vidisha, who would be all alone in the world now. *You don’t deserve this, my child.*

“Are you thinking about your daughter?”

Seema looked at him with rage. *Is the bastard reading my thoughts?*

“Poor girl. How will she survive?” he taunted her with a sad face. “Both her parents dying horrible deaths. Really awful.”

“You’re going to pay for your deeds. I might be dead then, but remember what I say today. You’ll die in excruciating pain. There will be retribution for every horror you’ve committed.”

He didn’t reply. Just kept looking into Seema’s eyes with a smirk.

“I have a gift for you,” he said, pulling out a manila envelope from his coat pocket. He passed it to Seema, who hesitated for a moment, but couldn’t avoid taking it.

Seema looked at what was inside. It was a stack of photographs. She eased them out. Her eyeballs almost popped out on seeing the first photo. *Oh my God!* It was the severed head of a man she had met recently. *Dr Kalyan Ghosh.* Her hands began trembling. She quickly shuffled through the next few photos. All of them were images of Dr. Kalyan’s headless corpse, taken from different angles. She felt sick, but being a crime reporter, it wasn’t the

first time she was looking at such photos. She tried to pull herself together.

However, the next photo gave her nothing short of a nervous breakdown. It was the picture of a completely mangled car taken from the front. A smashed skull was protruding from its shattered windshield. Her heart began thumping. The churning in her stomach grew worse. *No. No. Please, no.* She looked at the number plate. *No.* It was her husband's car. The photo was of the horrific road accident in which Mohit had passed away.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" she screamed and tossed the photos at the Doctor's face.

The man didn't flinch. He was smiling.

"We administered you with NB-67 a couple of hours ago. But you're a tough bitch. The drug failed to express itself within your body. As I told you before, I had a card up my sleeves to make this game interesting. We call it external stimulation. These photos have helped us achieve that. What I've shown you is absolutely nothing in comparison to what you'll go through now. Good luck!" he said and left the room.

Prakash was the last man to leave Roshni Lodge. The trio had decided to move out one by one in different directions to avoid being trailed. The plan was to meet at the Ambala Cantt. Railway Station in two hours and take a train to New Delhi. That appeared to be the safest way out of this place.

Mrinal had gone to check out his car in spite of Prakash's warning. It was just too much for him to dump his car in some alley. He wanted to place it in some car garage for repairs and come back for it when things cooled off.

It was a bright sunny day. Prakash walked on the road in front of the lodge for a few minutes and then sneaked into a narrow lane. He kept his pace normal. Any sign of panic could be a giveaway. The lane ended in another road leading up to the Grand Trunk road. He checked for any suspicious movement in the small betel shops, metal works shops and car-repair garages lined up on the road. An auto-rickshaw was coming his way. He signalled it to stop. It was time to visit the hotel he was previously checked in at Ambala. He had called up the reception at the hotel to pack-up his bag and send it downstairs. *Let's hope everything goes well.*

An auto-rickshaw laboured past the heavy traffic on Jagadhari Road. The heat had steadily risen in the last few hours and it seemed to have rubbed off the driver the wrong way. He was cursing every obstacle on the road, be it living or non-living. In contrast, the passenger sitting behind him was feeling

a lot lighter.

Kunal felt as if a ton of weight had been lifted off his chest. Consumed by the guilt of murdering his friends, he had seen his life become hell over the years. But now, he had the chance to redeem himself. He had put Prakash on the right track. Once they reached New Delhi, he would become an undercover source for him. *The devil will finally be defeated.*

He recalled the hardships he had faced since that fateful night. After the gruesome turn of events, he could never gather the courage to return to his college. There was also no family to go back to. His parents were long dead. He couldn't even claim their insurance money because he was believed to be dead or missing. Getting back to live a normal life was too risky.

So, he took up small time jobs of a driver, a waiter and an insurance salesman, often shifting bases from one part of the country to another. He had not been able to sleep peacefully a single day, often awakened by the slightest of sounds. One day, unable to bear the mental torture any more, he decided that enough was enough. He would find and bring to justice the men who destroyed his life.

He clenched his jaws with anger. *These bastards will be on TV soon. Open for vultures to feast on them. A lot of sins are going to be paid for.*

A usually secluded farmhouse in the Jharoda Kalan village, located in one of the green belts of Delhi, was witnessing some unusual action today. Two bulky Toyota Land Cruisers had made their way through the gates. They were followed by a Swift Dzire and an Indica. A couple of hours ago a Toyota Innova had also found its way into the farmhouse. Once these cars were inside, the gates of the farmhouse were locked. A few men dressed in military camouflage attire and armed with M-4 carbine rifles spread themselves throughout the compound.

Tejeshwar Kushwaha was happy to be back in Delhi after almost two years. This was the city that had helped him become who he was today. Delhi often made him feel more powerful. He looked out his window, as his Land Cruiser passed by a carefully manicured garden. It pulled over near the entrance of a large hall connected to a two-storied building at its back. His driver Dara Singh stepped out to open the door of the SUV for him.

Another Land Cruiser stopped exactly behind his. Vinod Kushwaha came out of it. The other cars streamed into a small parking lot beside the garden and stopped there.

A muscular man with crew-cut hair came out from the hall and greeted Tejeshwar. Not able to recognize him, he turned his head towards his son Vinod in an asking gesture.

“He is Jatin Solanki. We call him Sultan. He is Ex-MARCOS, and leads our core operations,” said Vinod. MARCOS stood for Marine Commandos,

the elite Special Ops unit of the Indian Navy.

“Where’s Pramod?” Tejeshwar asked with a frown. “I thought he was in-charge when you took over.”

“He has joined Academi full-time.”

Academi was the new identity for Blackwater, the powerful private military organization of the US.

“Why? And when?” Tejeshwar shot back. “You should’ve informed me.”

Pramod used to be his old warhorse and an exceptional operative. Losing him to another organization was a big loss.

“He was too old-fashioned. Unwilling to toe the line,” Vinod said bluntly. “The new line.”

Tejeshwar shook his head with regret. *Vinod is changing the core of what we stood for.*

Sultan tried to deflect the topic of discussion. “The Quds party is already here. They are sitting in the quarters.”

“Let’s go then,” Vinod said, not looking at his father.

Sultan led them through the hall into a room furnished with three large sofa sets. A mini bar stood at one corner of the room. It often served as the meeting room for the Kushwahas.

There were three men sitting on a sofa. They were of middle-eastern origins – fair and dark haired. Their casual clothes intended to present them as common tourists from the Middle East. But Tejeshwar knew otherwise.

These men belonged to the Quds Force, a Special Forces unit of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. It was devoted to spreading the Islamic revolution throughout the world. The current tug-of-war between Iran and their old foe Israel over the former’s attempts at building a nuclear arsenal had prepared the ground for the Quds. They were now spread over countries like Thailand, India, Kenya, Georgia and Azerbaijan, hunting down Israeli diplomats and Mossad agents. The Quds were behind the recent spate of attacks on Israeli embassy staff in India, Georgia and Thailand.

The Iranians stood up seeing Tejeshwar and Vinod enter the room. Sultan began introducing them, reading their names from a small chit.

“Meet Mr. Karim Behzadi, Mr. Ali Jabbari and Mr. Massoud Fallahi.”

Tejeshwar shook hands with them. So did his son. He gestured towards Sultan, telling him to move out of the room.

Massoud looked like their leader to Tejeshwar. He was old, but his eyes

held the sharpness of a spy who had seen the world a lot. The man was looking at him, reading him. Tejeshwar didn't expect this man to do the talking. *He'll just observe.*

He was proven correct when Karim began the discussion, looking at Vinod. "Mr. Kushwaha we come with a reference from one of your previous clients and we desire to use your services."

"Call me Vinod, please. So, who's the client you're talking about?"

Tejeshwar interjected before Karim could reply. "Let us not discuss any client names or previous missions in this forum." He looked into his son's eyes, indicating what he said was meant for him. *How many times will I have to tell you not to discuss our clients openly?*

Vinod understood his father's intent and changed the topic. "How do you want us to help you?"

"We understand that the Kushwaha family has been in the business of special operations which can be executed outside the perimeter of law. We desire to carry out one such operation in your country. But it will not be against India, it will be against an old enemy."

"And what would that operation be?"

"We want you to carry out an attack on an Israeli contingent visiting Bangalore. They are here for an international nuclear science summit."

"It would be great if you can clarify what you mean by an attack?" Vinod asked.

"We want everyone in the contingent dead. These people are Israeli scientists," Karim said.

"Scientists!" Vinod frowned. "Why do you want to kill scientists?"

Karim looked at Massoud, as if asking for his permission to continue. Massoud closed his eyes for a moment and then nodded.

Karim continued, "The war between Iran and Israel is no longer between the soldiers and the diplomats. It has spilled over to the civilians. Our country's nuclear weapons program has been sabotaged by the bloody Zionist regime, with ample support from the Americans. They have used every means possible – sanctions, war threats, assassinations, computer viruses and God knows what. We have lost a lot of our key nuclear scientists over the years in attacks perpetrated by the Mossad. Most have been killed in our own country. Some were going to work, some traveling with family, some picking up children from day care. All killed in cold blood."

He went on, "Then they attacked us with a computer virus... Stuxnet, one of the most sophisticated computer viruses ever. It led to many industrial accidents in our nuclear plants. We lost probably a decade of work because of this Goddamn virus. So, we decided to attack these motherfuckers back. Quds Force, that is us, has taken this war back to them. You remember the attacks on Israeli diplomats across the world as few years back?"

"The magnetic 'sticky bombs' you stuck on cars?" Vinod asked.

"Yes."

Tejeshwar recalled the attack on an Israel diplomat's wife in New Delhi a few years back. She was moving around the city in a car when a motorcyclist stuck a 'sticky bomb' at its rear. It was a big failure because the lady survived the explosion. He was amused when the hilarious failures of Quds Force came to his mind. Their agents would visit countries for big missions and then stay at five star hotels. They would get attracted to honey traps in nightclubs and bars and then caught by counter-agents.

"This time we want to hit the Israelis in their guts," Karim continued. "You kill our scientists, we will kill yours."

"If your men can bomb a car in India's capital city on your own, why can't you do it again in Bangalore?" Vinod asked. "Why do you need our help?"

Tejeshwar was really happy his son asked this question. Even though cross-questioning could make them lose the deal, it was important to ask difficult questions. *Taking up missions you can't accomplish can land you in big trouble.*

"We can't attack them so easily this time. The Israelis are aware of the threat and they have requested your government for heavy security at the nuclear summit. Also, we would admit that the Quds force has seen quite a lot of failures over the years in their missions worldwide. So, we want to use local contractors this time."

"Suppose we carry out this attack on the Israelis. Will you then claim responsibility for the attack?" Tejeshwar asked.

"No. Obviously, we will not. Our government will deny any knowledge of it," Karim said.

Tejeshwar knew this could land them in a soup. An attack on Israel's scientists by an Indian group could strain relationships between the two countries. India will use all its resources to track and capture the perpetrators.

The Kushwahas would be termed as terrorists. Even the old allies will desert them. They may even lose their international business.

“We cannot take up this mission in that scenario. We don’t want to be called as terrorists. Without anyone taking responsibility for this attack, it’s us who will be left to face the wrath of Israel,” Tejeshwar said. He saw Vinod looking at him with questioning eyes.

“This is ridiculous. We will be inviting a war if we openly claim to have attacked the Israelis,” Karim argued. “By the way, we believed your organization specializes in such covert attacks.”

“That’s true. But we never take sides. We are always neutral. In your case, we don’t look that neutral. Do we?” Tejeshwar debated. “With your country safely denying any involvement, we are going to eat a lot of shit. Hell, we cannot make enemies out of countries.”

Massoud, who was a quiet observer till now, broke his silence at last. He spoke with the demeanour of a leader. “Is there any other way your organization can help us accomplish this mission?”

Tejeshwar noticed that Massoud was speaking to Vinod and not to him. *Is the fucker playing on my son’s mind?* He saw that Vinod was already feeling restless for not getting an opportunity to take a decision.

“I am afraid, we cannot be involved at all in this mission,” Tejeshwar said.

“Father, can we have a discussion in private?” Vinod said in a complaining tone. He looked miffed.

Tejeshwar clenched his teeth in anger as he saw Vinod walk into the adjoining room. For the first time ever, someone had questioned his decision. He could have upbraided Vinod then and there, but decided against it. One should not show the differences within family members to outsiders. He stood up and followed Vinod into the next room.

“What is this, father? This is such a lucrative party. We cannot lose them,” Vinod protested. “Why are you refusing?”

“Because you still have a lot to understand how this world operates,” Tejeshwar said, trying to keep his calm. “We are contractors. We don’t take sides. Terrorists take sides. With this mission we would clearly look like terrorists fighting Jihad.”

“But you’ve said multiple times that Jihad will give us the maximum business in future.”

“That’s true. But the Jihadis claim responsibility for whatever they do. They don’t let their contractors fight their own survival game.”

“When you kill someone, you take a side. Your client’s side. That’s a fact,” Vinod said brusquely. “We have played this game for generations. I guess you should let me play it my way now.”

“I will not have any more of this discussion,” Tejeshwar roared. “We are done. Tell these people to leave.” He went upstairs, leaving Vinod seething with anger.

As the Iranian trio got into their Innova, Vinod saw Massoud making a gesture towards him with his eyes. He was calling him. Vinod approached his car window.

“I still believe we can strike a deal,” Massoud whispered and looked into his eyes. “And let me assure you, our purse strings are pretty loose for people who can execute our strategic missions.”

Vinod stood there for a few moments. He was thinking.

He first hesitated for a second and then said, “I think there’s a way.”

The Doctor was feeling the first pangs of frustration. He had spent the last half hour looking at the screen of his monitor, watching the real time video feed from Seema's chamber. He was dismayed at the lack of any reaction in her even after exposing her to external stimulations. His screen showed Seema slouched on the floor, looking unconscious. *Wake up bitch. Show me some results.*

His phone started ringing. *Sultan. Shit!* He answered the call.

"What's up, Sultan?" he said, faking a smile.

"Why is the bitch still alive?" Sultan hissed.

"She's under my watch. I've given her the drug."

"To hell with your experiments. Listen to me carefully. I know you went behind my back and convinced the bosses to give the girl to you. I don't like that."

"Sorry to have hurt you so much," the Doctor sneered. "NB-67 is still not perfect. I need more subjects, more trials. You guys just know how to pull a trigger and kill somebody. But that somebody can be more useful as a guinea pig. You haven't given me a single subject after Nitin Tomar. So what do I do?"

"You sound like a vampire to me doc," Sultan mocked. "In your blood lust, you gave this journo enough breadcrumbs to follow us into Bandhavgarh. Who knows how many people she has tipped off about this case? This is a mess. We have to clean it up. And by the way, powerful

people have started taking interest in this case. You know what I mean. Right?"

"Right," the Doctor said and ended the call.

A wave of fear passed through his mind. *Powerful people? This is bad news.* He looked at his monitor again. Still no movement from Seema. He shook his head in dejection and dialled the number of the security head. *Such a waste of an opportunity.*

"Hey Pawan," he said. "Sultan wants us to wrap up. You know what to do."

"So it has come to that, finally?"

"Yes, I'm afraid."

Raman stood over a foot-over bridge at the Ambala Cantt. railway station. His targets were standing beneath on the first platform. All three of them were going to catch the same train to New Delhi. *Such a bad idea.*

He had followed one of his targets to reach the railway station, and to his luck, found all three of them together. It all happened because he chose to keep an eye on the broken car. His men had located the car yesterday night, parked amid darkness and then covered judiciously. Yet, they hadn't been able to locate the targets, because of which he had to come into the picture.

He smiled upon recalling how easy it was afterwards. He took a vantage point above a building opposite to the car and kept it under constant surveillance. He saw positive results very soon.

A man had come to check the car out. *Mistake number one.* The idiot then drove the car to a garage on the Grand Trunk Road, rarely checking for any pursuers. *Mistake number two.* The man then took an auto-rickshaw for the railway station. He quickly found his friends and here they were – huddled up together to catch the same train. *His last mistake.*

Raman had not brought any weapon. He didn't want to take such a big risk at a public place often patrolled by the police. The only option was to pursue these people till they got themselves into 'his' zone. Hence, he had booked a ticket for the same train.

He heard the arrival announcement of the train to New Delhi. It was time to move. He dialled a number on his mobile phone and said, "Keep a car

ready outside New Delhi station. Bring my kit too.”

Seema felt as if she was moving. Her eyelids were heavy. Through their narrow slits, she tried to make sense of what was happening. *Am I on a wheelchair?* She tried moving her hands and legs, but they were tied to the chair. *Where are they taking me?* She tried screaming. But to her dismay, she could only scream inside her mind.

The deadly concoction of drugs in her bloodstream was making her feel groggy. She remembered vomiting and then passing out over the cold tiles. Terrible thoughts had been running through her mind like a horror movie reel. In one dream, she saw that Vidisha was being chased by gunmen. She was crying for help. In another dream, she saw herself running a car over her husband, crushing him beneath. She constantly kept shaking her head to end the hallucinations, but they wouldn't stop.

She heard the ding-dong sound of a lift. Her wheelchair was pushed inside. She felt as if she was being pushed into a well. Something in the water kept pulling her down, while she gasped for breath. She felt suffocated, but her hands were tied. She used all her strength trying to free them up, but her shackles didn't budge.

She heard a ding-dong again. *Is it a dream?* She shook her head so hard that her neck began to ache. This time she was able to open her eyes. She saw she was in a lift, which had reached the ground floor. Her wheelchair was being pushed across a corridor. She wondered who the person behind her was. The place felt very hot. *Why?* She looked up. There were thick metal

overhead pipes running all over the place. *Steam.*

A heavy-set man with a massive scar on his right cheek and dressed in army attire walked towards her wheelchair. He and the person standing behind her had a discussion in whispers. Seema understood that the man with the scar was now in-charge of her. He started pushing her wheelchair at a much faster pace. At a dead end, he took a sharp left turn and then stopped. He looked around as if checking for any onlookers. Satisfied that no one was following them, he whispered, "Are you OK?"

Seema tried to study him, but wasn't able to concentrate on his face. It was a blur.

"Look, I don't know where they are taking you. But just try to stay alive. We'll soon get you out."

Seema shook her hands, indicating him to open her shackles.

"I'm so sorry. I can't do that," he said, closing his eyes with regret. "We have spent so much effort in infiltrating this organization. If I set you loose, all will be lost. But I assure you that you'll be saved. Just stay alive somehow."

He began pushing the wheelchair again. They turned at another corner and entered the final corridor. A grilled door stood at the far end of it. There was an armed guard sitting at the gate. Some discussion happened between the two men and she was now passed on to her new carrier.

The guard brought her chair out into the open. Even though she was delirious, she felt elated seeing the open sky and the afternoon sun. The place looked like the backyard of a factory. There were huge cylindrical pipes and rusty machinery parts lying all over the ground. A wall with a barbwire concertina on its top stood about twenty meters away. She wondered what lay beyond. The place didn't look like the jungle where she was captured. Hell, it didn't even look like Bandhavgarh. *What is this place?*

Her mind began to wander again. She shook her head again, but to no effect. A dark dream began to envelop her.

A muscular man wearing sunglasses emerged from the building behind Seema and stood in front of her. He was the same guy who had kidnapped her and then killed her driver. The man walked with the swagger of a hardened criminal. He gestured the guard to go away. Taking out a sharp knife from his pocket, he cut the duct tapes tying her limbs to the chair.

Even though he had freed his hostage from bondage, he didn't see any movement in her body. Seema's head was down. She kept looking at the ground.

"Wake up sweetie. Papa wants to play with you," the man said, chewing gum in his mouth.

No response.

The man grabbed Seema's lower jaw and wrenched it upwards to see her face. He removed his sunglasses and looked into her eyes. They were open, yet looked completely lost. He gave her a mild slap.

Still no response.

He looked at her from top to bottom with lustful eyes.

"So, you're angry with Papa. Aren't you? Let me make you happy," he said, sliding his right hand inside Seema's kurta. He slipped his hand into her bra and cupped her breast. He pressed his hand tighter and started pinching her.

Still no response.

Biting his lips in anger, he took out his hand out of her kurta and growled,

“Bitch! You aren’t going to like what I’m gonna do to you.” He started to yank out her pyjamas with forceful jerks.

The next moment, he felt her hand on his eye. Before he could react, she inserted the sharp finger nails of her thumb and index finger at the corners of his left eye and gouged it out. The eye was now dangling from sinuous nerves and blood vessels. Blood and gooey fluids gushed out of the hollow socket.

The man screamed with horror. With trembling fingers, he touched his wound and writhed in pain. He kept moving backwards till he stumbled and fell. The knife he was carrying dropped on the ground. He tried to pick it up, but couldn’t. His lone eye and the severe pain were not letting him concentrate. The knife wasn’t where it looked to be. His hand kept grazing the soil.

Seema stood up from her chair. Her eyes were bulging, resembling those of a wild tusker on a killing spree. She moved towards him and picked up the knife. Howling like a kid, he started to retreat, dragging his body backwards in the soil, but unable to stand up. She plunged the knife into his stomach and kept on stabbing him till he stopped moving. His body was completely still now.

She walked towards one end of the compound like a zombie, carrying the bloody knife in her hand. With her blurry eyes, she saw someone coming towards her.

It was a man carrying a rifle.

Prakash stood at the door of his compartment, trying to get some respite from the heat, with the cool wind blowing into his face. The train had been moving since the last thirty minutes. The hot summer day had ensured that it was filled sparsely. That's why they had easily got seats in the chair car section.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Mrinal.

"Your leg is bleeding," he said.

Prakash looked down at his legs. His trousers had a crimson coloured blotch near his right knee. *The piece of shrapnel*. He rolled up his pants to check his wound. The chip of metal, which was only slightly protruding a few days ago was jutting out like a small nail today. He tried pulling it out, but it stung like hell.

"You need to see a doctor," Mrinal sympathised.

Prakash nodded and decided to ignore his wound.

Mrinal hesitated for a moment and then asked, "You got it in the explosion, didn't you?"

Prakash kept looking out of door with clenched jaws. He didn't want to talk about it.

"What happened exactly?" his friend pressed on.

"People died!" Prakash spat. "That's what happens in an explosion. OK?"

A momentary expression of grief crossed Mrinal's face. He placed his hand on Prakash's shoulder. "I have seen death," he said. "It haunts."

Prakash saw pain in his friend's eyes.

Mrinal kept talking. "My father committed suicide when I was ten. He was a stock trader. The prick's suicide note was funny. He said he had lost all his money in the stock market. He was neck deep in debt, which not even ten fucking sons like me could ever repay. So he chose an easy way. He hung himself. Bloody loser."

Mrinal looked down for a minute, avoiding Prakash's eyes. When he lifted his head, he had a forced smile on his face. "See, I'm not new to death. You can tell me what happened with you."

Prakash hesitated, but still began, "I had gone to Banka a month back to cover a story on children being forcefully recruited into the cadres of the Naxalites."

"Banka? Where is this place?"

"It's a district in Bihar. A place gifted with a dense forest cover and picturesque landscapes. But no tourist worth his salt would go there. These forests are infested with Naxalites. Banka is a battleground for their bloody war with the police and the administration," Prakash said.

He continued, "The day this all happened was the most terrible day of my life. We were accompanying the CISF commandos in their night patrol through the dark forests. There were two jeeps. In the first one, I sat with three CISF jawans. The jeep following us comprised of two of my colleagues and three more jawans."

"Colleagues, meaning?"

"Ojas Patel, who was my cameraman and Ishwar Toppo, a local freelancing journalist," he said. "While we were passing through a narrow trail cutting across the jungle, I heard a 'click' behind our vehicle. That's the most dangerous sound you can hear in those forests. In a second, an explosion tossed up the jeep coming behind us in the air. The flat ground behind us was now a two feet deep ditch. We had been lucky to miss that landmine. The other jeep wasn't."

"Before anyone realized what happened, we heard gunshots coming from the bushes. We had run into an ambush. There was absolutely no chance of survival if the Naxals got to us. The driver of my jeep knew exactly what he had to do. He drove like a mad man for the next half an hour, till we were back in the CISF camp."

"Did anyone survive that explosion?" Mrinal asked.

“Three people, which included Ojas Patel, survived the explosion. Only to be shot from a point blank range by the Naxals. They left no survivors. Five mutilated bodies were found the next morning and then sent over to a local government hospital,” Prakash said and got lost in his thoughts for a few moments.

When he talked again, his eyes had tears in them. “Ojas Patel was a close friend of mine. His death shook me to the core. What do you do when the devastated wife of a newly married guy looks at you with blaming eyes? I felt something break inside my heart. My anxiety knew no bounds when I had to take her to the hospital to identify her husband’s body. I stood at the morgue door while she walked over to his lifeless body, lying on the floor. Beating her chest and sobbing, she crouched and embraced his body. At that dreadful moment, I heard a ‘click’ again. What followed was a deafening explosion and darkness before my eyes.”

“I opened my eyes three days later in an ICU. The doctors could recover only seventeen pieces of shrapnel from my body. The remaining, they had to leave,” he said. “I came to know that Ojas Patel’s wife was dead. And it was because her body bore the full brunt of the explosion that I was alive. The Naxals had surgically inserted pressure-activated IEDs into all the dead bodies.”

“Bloody bastards!” Mrinal said.

Prakash closed his eyes and sat down on the floor near the door. Mrinal also sat beside him.

After ten minutes of silence, Mrinal said, “Yet another profession which takes its toll on the people involved. My previous profession was also like that. You wanted to know my trade secret, didn’t you?”

Prakash looked at him, puzzled.

“People think that I used to be an equity analyst before I took up this current job. I was much more than that. I was an investment banker and an options trader who used to work for a shady group. This group comprised of hundreds of subsidiary companies with cross holdings amongst them. If you can untangle this web, you’ll come across a startling revelation. Its stakeholders are a group of very senior officials of the RAW and the IB.”

He continued, “Now consider this – every terrorist attack on the country and every international dispute in which India is involved creates a ripple in the financial markets. Look at what happened to the hotel stocks after the

26/11 attacks in Mumbai. They nosedived. What if you know in advance about these threats and play in the markets accordingly? What if you buy a 'Put option' knowing perfectly well that a stock is going to tumble? You will make a hell lot of money."

"This is insider trading, isn't it? And it's illegal."

"Yes. It's illegal. But maybe no one was able to catch these people. Or maybe they chose to ignore them. Whatever! I used to churn out bullshit reports speculating whether to buy or sell a stock. There would be all kinds of calculations and research to indicate a trend. It was all financial garbage. In reality, I already knew the macro trends, which would sway the market. I made a small fortune for myself this way, helped by this shady organization."

"Why did you leave it?"

"Because I was scared. My life was surrounded by terrible news of things yet to happen and I wasn't able to do anything about it. At times I thought that a few attacks were allowed to happen so that these people could make money."

"I can't believe it!"

"It's true. I left that organization and went dark for a few years. I'm alive only because I've never disclosed my story to anyone. Over the duration of my work, I'd built some strong contacts in the RAW and the IB. These were the people who had made money through my firm. So in a way, we were partners in crime."

"That's your secret sauce?"

"Yeah. That's my little secret. These people have access to all the databases of the Government. They can even coerce telecom companies to provide them with information on their subscribers," Mrinal said. "So now you know how I work."

Prakash sighed. *How many more mind blowing disclosures?*

A faint sound brought Prakash back into the present world. His mobile phone was ringing. *Ritesh Pandey*. He answered the call.

"Where have you been Prakash?" Ritesh asked. "No calls. Nothing. I was worried about you."

"Why? What happened?"

“I’ll tell you. First tell me how’s your investigation going?”

“The going has been a bit tough at times. But I’ve managed to get my hands on some really explosive material.”

“That’s good. We’ll talk more on this when you come here. But I was a bit curious about the death of Mohammed Afroz. His autopsy report surprises me.”

“I haven’t seen it. Can you elaborate?”

“Oh! Then you don’t know that traces of Etorphine were found in his bloodstream?”

“Hell, no! What’s this chemical?”

“Etorphine is a highly potent tranquilizer for veterinary use. Its distribution is extremely regulated. Despite the fact that it has some painkilling properties, its use in humans is almost unheard of.”

“Then it’s obvious. Afroz was murdered. This proves it,” Prakash said. “What about the gun discovered in the pond at Ambala?”

“The police got a match. The M107 found in the pond is exactly the gun, which was used to kill Nitin Tomar at Allahabad. But I’m surprised you aren’t aware of all these developments. Are you alright?”

“Well, I’ve been through some trouble. I am surviving somehow.”

“Be careful then. I don’t want you to vanish like Seema Sharma.”

Prakash stood motionless. *Did he say Seema?* “What happened to ... Seema?”

“She disappeared near Bandhavgarh National Park a couple of days back. Was working on the Nitin Tomar story. Just like you.”

Prakash felt as if he was stabbed with a dagger. “What! What do you mean by disappear?”

“It means she’s missing without any trace. Century News has kept the news under wraps. But my sources have confirmed.”

“Was she alone?” Prakash asked. A throbbing pain rose from his heart, choking his throat with sadness.

“I guess so,” Ritesh replied. “Poor girl. I remember meeting her once. She was a good journalist.”

Prakash closed his eyes in grief. “She was my friend.”

“I am sorry... But, I wonder what she was doing in Bandhavgarh? Do you have any idea?”

“No,” he said. But he knew what took Seema to Bandhavgarh. *The search*

for Kunal Chaubey.

“When are you planning to come back?”

“I’m on my way.”

“OK. Stay safe.” Ritesh hung up.

Prakash squeezed his eyes shut, leaning his head back against the wall of the compartment. *Why did you go alone, Seema?*

“Drop your weapon!” the man barked, pointing a sub-machine gun at Seema. “Drop it and we can talk. Quick! ... I’m not going to hurt you.”

Seema stood dazed, realizing she had killed a man in a brutal way. But she felt no remorse. Everything still looked like a bad dream. An unfamiliar anxiety was eating her inside. She struggled to stand straight, her hands and legs twitching. Her defensive instincts were not permitting her hand to let go of the knife. *Is this what the drug does to everybody?* She shook her head, trying to fly back into ‘reality’.

“Do as I say,” he said again, his voice calm this time. “Please. We haven’t got much time.”

She looked at him with suspicion. He was completely bald, his brown scalp shining under the sun. Just like the others, he was dressed in military camouflage clothing. But something in his eyes conveyed that he was not going to hurt her. She let the knife slip from her hand.

“Are you feeling OK?” he said, taking cautious little steps towards her. “I know you’re not. But can you run?”

With great effort, Seema uttered a few words, “Who are you?”

“As of now, I’m the only one who stands between you and your captors,” he said, holding her hand. “Let’s get out of here first. You’ll need to run.”

The man galloped towards a corner of the compound. Seema followed him. In a few moments, they were standing over a large concrete block rising a foot above the ground. It had a number of manhole covers on it. “We’ll use

their underground drainage system to escape,” he said, yanking out a loose manhole cover and sliding it away.

He knelt down and inserted his head into the hole, checking for a way out. “This looks good to me. You get in first. I’ll follow.”

“There is a metal ladder fastened to the inner rim. Use it to climb down,” he added, helping Seema place her foot on the first rung.

She had no shoes on her feet. The harsh coldness of the rungs were helping her get back into her senses. As she descended into the darkness, an overpowering smell reached her nostrils. It was the stench of human filth and foul smelling chemicals. When her feet sank into the slurry, she felt her stomach rebel with disgust. She puked right away.

“Don’t stop. Keep moving,” a voice came from behind. Her rescuer was hanging from the ladder.

She looked ahead. There was only one way to go – the one leading outwards from the compound. The tunnel was quite dark where she stood. But at a far end she could sense some light trickling in. She started walking, her feet paddling through the slurry. Her mind recalled the incident an hour back where the person pushing her wheel chair had whispered into her ears. *‘We have infiltrated this organization.’*

Is this man an infiltrator?

Seema turned around and looked at the silhouette of the man coming behind. “This is not Bandhavgarh,” she said. “What is this place?”

“You won’t believe it,” he said. “You’re in the outskirts of Delhi.”

“Where exactly?”

“Faridabad,” he said and walked past her, leaving her puzzled.

Faridabad! They have brought me from Madhya Pradesh to Faridabad!

She quickly realized that she must have been drugged and then moved around in their car.

“Hey! This is the place where we can get out,” the man said. He was standing under a square shaped hatch over their heads. Light was peeping in through the thin openings around its rim. There were a few metallic steps installed on the tunnel walls for climbing.

“I’m going up,” he said and started climbing. Upon reaching the top rung, he pushed out the hatch door, creating a squared shaped opening in the roof. He made his way out of the hole and then crouched at its mouth. “Climb up. I’ll pull you out.”

Seema put her legs on the rungs and started climbing. She gave her hand to him, who then pulled her out.

She was now out in the open. The tall wall of the compound was now about a hundred meters behind her. The place seemed to be some rural land covered with wild bushes and tall grass. A winding road encircled the land like a garland. She could see a few huts beside the road.

“We need to reach that road,” he said, pointing in the direction she was looking at. “One of my colleagues is coming for us.”

While walking towards the road, she studied the man. Dark skinned and muscular, he was probably in his forties. His fitness and gait suggested an army background. Besides the sub-machine gun, he was also carrying a pistol mounted over his belt.

“Who are you? Tell me,” she probed. “No bullshit this time.”

“I am Divakar Amre. Used to be a Lieutenant in the Indian Army. Nowadays I work on contract for the Intelligence Bureau,” he said. “Your captors have been under our radar for some time. But IB could never get any substantive evidence against these guys. This organization seemed to be a part of a much bigger scheme. So, IB decided to plant their moles inside this org. I am one of the infiltrators. Are you satis...”

He stopped and yelled all of a sudden, “Lie down. Immediately!”

Before she could gather her wits, he shoved her to the ground. The grass blades and shrubs dug into her skin and clothes, adding to her agony. She looked at Divakar with scared eyes. He had raised both his hands. Someone was holding him at gunpoint.

“I’ll take care of this,” he talked under his breath. “Just keep lying there.”

He started walking and disappeared from her view.

Vinod Kushwaha was smoking his fifth cigarette of the day. He was sitting in the same discussion room where they had hosted the Iranians. He puffed out smoke from his mouth, making a smoke ring in the air.

“What do you think of my plan, Sultan?” he asked the man sitting beside him. Vinod knew his trusted comrade would always give him the right advice, devoid of bias or fear.

“Frankly speaking, it scares me. It can make or break us,” Sultan said, with a brooding expression in his eyes. “*Bade Sahib* will not be happy.”

“Your *Bade Sahib* has become trapped in his old school of thought,” Vinod hissed. “He fears taking risks. I don’t. And in our case, the returns are lucrative enough to take that risk.”

He added, “In today’s world, nations don’t fight each other in public. They go for proxy wars and covert operations. The demand for mercenaries and contractors who can carry out these black ops is rising. This Iran assignment can get us a pie of the covert operations market globally. That’s big.”

“What if the Israelis find out about us? Can we afford to invite the wrath of a country?” Sultan argued. “Remember the 1972 Munich Olympics? Guess what the Israelis did to the Palestinian killers of their eleven athletes?”

“Enlighten me,” Vinod said with a smirk.

“The Mossad chased each and every conspirator throughout the world over the next decade. After killing them, they used to send bouquets to their

families with a message saying ‘We never forget and never forgive’.”

Mossad, Israel’s national intelligence agency, was widely respected and feared in the world for their clinical efficiency and ruthlessness. They used to get ample support from Jewish communities spread globally, making them all pervasive throughout the world.

“I don’t think it would come to that. If everything goes as per my plan, Iran and Israel will have their own axes to grind. No one will blame us.” He made another smoke ring in the air. “You just wait and watch.”

Seema raised her head slightly and peeked through the tall leaves of grass. About ten meters away on the road, two men in military camouflage clothing stood face to face with each other. Divakar had raised his hands and was protesting animatedly. Thrusting a gun onto his chest was another man, whose car was parked behind him.

We have been intercepted, thought Seema clenching her jaws. *God help me if Divakar fails to convince this man.* She deliberated what she would do in case he gets popped. *Keep lying down or bolt from this place?* Running seemed to be a better option, because she expected the grassland to swarm with mercenaries in a matter of minutes. Now that her nausea was gone and her body was responding to her mind, she could make a quick dash for the huts far away.

She saw Divakar passing his ID card to the man, who glanced at it for a second and dropped it on the ground. The soldier ordered him to kneel down. He first refused, but complied when the man shoved his gun harder into his chest.

This is not looking good. Seema realized she had to do something soon.

The faint hum of a vehicle distracted her for a moment. Far down the road, towards her right, she saw a couple of SUVs rushing menacingly towards Divakar. The vehicles had come out of the facility behind her. *We are finished.* Her mind began racing. She couldn't think of any great idea. What she finally did left even her surprised.

She shouted, "They are coming, Divakar!"

The soldier swivelled his gun sideways, in the direction of her voice. But, by doing this, he had made a big mistake, which he didn't have any time to realize. Divakar pulled out his pistol in a fraction of a second and shot him in his head.

"Get in the car!" he screamed, searching for the car keys in the dead man's pockets.

Seema picked herself up and sprinted towards the car. From the corner of her eyes, she could see the two vehicles closing the gap between them fast. As soon as she settled into the front passenger's seat, Divakar got in from the driver's side. He had the keys with him.

"Here we go!" he said, starting the engine and speeding away from the pursuers.

Seema eyed the rear view mirror. The SUVs were coming after them. She looked at Divakar worryingly.

"I know," he said, pushing the accelerator further.

"Who was the man you killed?"

"One of their security guys. He knew you have escaped, but was doubtful of my involvement," he said, looking at her. "But, what you did was foolish. You could have..."

"I saved your ass."

Divakar nodded and then said, "Yeah. Thanks for that."

"Now, how do we lose these guys?" she asked, pointing at the rear view mirror.

"I have a plan. You'll have to take the wheel from me when I say."

Seema nodded slowly, with hesitation. *What's he up to?*

She looked ahead along their path. It was a two-lane road at best. And thankfully, no traffic was coming their way, allowing Divakar to top a hundred kilometres per hour. Their car raced past a massive cargo truck, its engine huffing-and-puffing like a T-Rex going for the kill. They must have advanced about hundred-fifty meters from the truck, when all of a sudden he reduced the speed of their car and brought it to a groaning halt. Screeeeeeech! Right in the middle of the road. Seema's heart missed a few beats. *What the...*

"Get into my seat," Divakar ordered, dashing out from the car. "And keep the engine running."

Within seconds, Seema realized what Divakar was trying to achieve. *Crazy son-of-...!* She jumped into the driver's seat, and looked into the rear-view mirror, wide-eyed.

He stood on the road, the massive truck rushing towards him like a bullet. The next moment, he took out his pistol and aimed it at its driver. The bearded man, a *sardar*, looked at him with terror. Divakar fired three bullets in succession – one smashing the windshield of the truck, one tearing into its front grill and the last one ricocheting off its fenders on the right side. The *sardar* whirled his steering wheel in panic. In response to this sudden movement, the trailer and the gigantic container placed over it swivelled about the engine compartment, sweeping the road like a blackboard duster. Sqrriiiiiiii. The driver pumped the brakes with all his might, desperately trying to stop the vehicle from swerving off the road. Vapours and smoke rose from the place where its tyres sheared against the road. Crank. Crank. Crank. Crank. An ear-piercing sound of metal, grinding, twisting and rattling, filled the air as dozens of tonnes of mass came to a stop, hardly a few metres from Divakar.

Seema kept staring with disbelief, her heart in her mouth. The truck was now standing on the road diagonally, blocking the traffic completely. Their pursuers were stuck on the other side of the barrier. Divakar dashed towards her car and took the passenger's seat.

"Go. Go. Go," he yelled.

Seema was speechless. She pushed the accelerator pedal.

"That is the craziest thing I have ever seen in my life," she said, shaking her head.

"Same here," he said, in between deep breaths, "I almost pissed my pants. Had he not braked, I was gone. Finished."

Seema didn't know what to say.

“Do you have a mobile phone?” Seema asked. “I want to call someone.”

Their car was passing through a crowded street, lined on both sides with small shops. She sat on the passenger’s seat, with Divakar on the wheel. They had exchanged seats with each other on their way.

“I threw it away in the gutter. Don’t want the fuckers to trace me,” he said. “And I would suggest you go a bit slow in telling the whole world about your escape.”

Seema stared at him for a few moments, and then said, “I wanted to talk to my daughter.”

“I am sorry. When did you last talk to her?”

“Before leaving for Bandhavgarh.”

“A couple of days ago, that means. Can’t it wait for a day more?”

“Why?” she asked defiantly.

“These people know about you. Who knows, they might be keeping an eye on your daughter or maybe tapping into your phone. We’ll have to lie low for a few days and let this wave pass over.”

“One second... where exactly are we going?”

“To a safe house in New Delhi,” he replied. “Chattarpur, to be precise.”

“No way!” she said. “I am going straight to my house. I will pick my daughter and we will fly off to a safer place.”

“There is no safer place, Miss. They will hunt you down. I know these men. They are not going to give up on you so easily,” Divakar said. “Can’t

your husband take care of her?”

“My husband is dead.”

“Well, sorry again. But isn’t there anybody else who can take your daughter into safe custody?”

She looked away from him.

Divakar slowed down the car and stopped it alongside the road.

“Just think again. We both have flirted with death to uncover a huge conspiracy,” he said, tilting his head sideways to look into her eyes. “The lives of so many people have been destroyed by these people. See what they have done to you. Don’t you want to see them suffer?”

He pressed on, “You have got some evidence, right? So have I. If you think hard, you may find more people who know something about this conspiracy. Let’s go and meet all such people. Let’s get the Doctor, his men and all their bosses by their balls. Until we do that we will not be safe. So, don’t blow up whatever we have achieved till now by taking a foolish step. Let’s stay in the dark till we figure out the right way to nail these bastards.”

Seema deliberated for a few moments and then said, “OK... But I’ll be with you for just one day. That is today. Tomorrow I’ll leave and go incognito till I’m ready with the final story.”

“Done.”

“And stop at a phone booth. I want to call somebody.”

She sank into her seat, her head thrown backwards. She tried in vain to ignore the nauseating stench of blood, puke and filth coming from her body and clothes. It made her feel like vomiting again. *I need a shower and some clean clothes. And something to eat.*

Sultan was not a man who would become tensed easily. He had been trained to keep his composure in tough situations. However, he was anything but calm as he walked around the garden in the farmhouse. There were too many things happening at once, but none going well. He wasn't happy with the way his men had handled the situations. *Give me a Marine Commando. I'll show these buggers how to be efficient.*

He had led numerous daring missions in his past life as a member of MARCOS. But the chain of events he was going to unleash threatened to make his past look like a walk in the park. He knew he would have to use every ounce of experience to pull this off.

He was only 23 years old when he was handpicked from the 340th Army Independent Brigade to be a part of India's version of the US Navy SEALs. The 1987 Sri Lankan civil war and the worsening insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir in the later years forged his reputation as an exceptional commando and a ruthless killer. From Jatin Solanki, he had become 'Sultan', his call sign in strategic missions.

But little did he know that the year 1998 was going to throw his life and possibly a distinguished career in the military into a downward spiral.

In February 1998, a fleet of two speedboats and two fishing trawlers, on their way to Burma, took an unauthorized halt at Andaman and Nicobar. The visitors were led by some key leaders of the Arakan Army, a rebel group fighting the military regime in Burma. They were shipping a huge

consignment of weapons planned for use in their domestic war against their authoritarian government. Normally, the Indian authorities never refused any temporary halts to these rebels.

But, what happened on that day still haunts India. Indian forces were ordered to take down the leaders of the Arakan Army in Andaman and Nicobar. The mission was called 'Operation Leech'. The man leading the mission was Sultan. He picked up a crack team of commandos for the job. Without wasting any time, his team reached the island and killed six top leaders of the rebels. They captured all the weapons.

The Indian military top brass justified their action by terming these rebels as 'weapon smugglers' who used to supply arms to the North-East separatists in India. But later investigations by the CBI and the media pointed to the contrary. Among the many conspiracy theories propounded, one claimed that the Indian government had connived with the military junta of Burma to help crush their rebellion in return for their help in containing the insurgency in the North-East. Another one said that it was a case of gross misinterpretation of intelligence.

Hounded by the media and human rights activists, the big daddies of Indian politics became furious. They wanted heads to roll. Sultan was the easiest scapegoat, the lowest hanging fruit. He was thrown out of the Navy.

In the angst-ridden days, which followed his exit, he began wasting his life on booze and women. He also had a nasty fight with a nightclub bouncer in which he almost killed the burly man. He would have gone to jail for certain, had he not been saved by Bastion Corp. The company took care of his case and also offered him the job of a security officer. He quickly became one of the top leaders of the private security company. Quick enough to be spotted by Vinod Kushwaha. Vinod recognised the cold blooded killer hiding within Sultan and initiated him into the world of black ops.

Over the years, he executed a lot of black operations with clinical efficiency. In one of the assignments he strategized, his team helped RAW in supplying arms to the Baluchistan rebels in Pakistan. In another assignment on the behest of China, he oversaw the assassination of a Tibetan insurgency leader hiding in Bihar.

His rise coincided with the change of command in the Kushwaha family. Tejeshwar Kushwaha, the old king, was retiring and handing over the reins of power to his son. Vinod, obsessed with his desire to run the organization his

way, began rubbing the old warhorses the wrong way. Some of them left, some vanished. The biggest departure was of Pramod Bhandari, Tejeshwar's right-hand man, who joined Academi. It came as a blessing for Sultan, as Vinod wasted no time in giving him the command for all black operations. Though this decision hadn't gone down well with the old man, he knew he did not have to worry about it as long as the prodigal son was happy with him. One way to do that was keeping as much distance as possible between the Kushwahas and the ground operations.

Nowadays, he led all missions from his plush office cum home at Vasant Kunj in New Delhi, never having to venture out ever, thereby limiting his exposure to the law enforcement authorities. He was just an authoritative voice on the phone that nobody dared disobey. Very few below his chain of command knew who he really was.

But today, the situation was different. As he walked across the lawn, a realization began to creep up on his mind. This mission was too critical to be handed over to the foot soldiers. *Its high time Sultan enters the game.* He had worked behind the scenes long enough for his men to make a mess of things. To accomplish Vinod's Iran gambit and rectify the mistakes in the NB-67 trials, a different mind was needed. A mind that can strategize and execute on the field. *Sultan.*

He dialled the number of one of his most trusted operatives.

"How is it going, Raman?"

"I'm in the train. Keeping a watch over them," Raman said. "A team is ready outside New Delhi railway station. We are going to get them soon."

"No. Do not engage till I order. Just keep following them and let me know the status every fifteen minutes."

"I didn't get you. You want me to stay away from them?"

"Yes. Just observe and report. I don't want to kill them. Not yet. But be ready to move in with full force when I command."

"May I know why?"

"Yes you will. But, in time. As of now, do as I say," Sultan hissed. "And one more thing..."

"What?"

"Carry a long range sniper rifle."

"Roger that," Raman said, ending the call.

Sultan thought for a moment and dialled another number. This time it was

an international call to a number in Iran through a secure channel. There on the other side was an Iranian underground operator known as *Qasab*, which meant ‘The Butcher’ in Persian. Qasab was in the same business as the Kushwahas. But he operated on a smaller scale and only inside his country. In the past, Qasab had been used many times by Sultan for intelligence gathering purposes. A couple of times, he had even helped make a few targets disappear.

This call was going to set in motion a series of events that could potentially bring two arch-enemies on the brink of a war. Sultan knew this and doubted if the Kushwaha family could emerge from this unscathed. But the decision had been taken. It was his duty to implement it.

Qasab picked up the phone and they exchanged pleasantries. Sultan came to the point quickly.

“We want detailed info on the movements of a few countrymen of yours. A list containing their names will be shared with you through an encrypted mail,” he said.

“You want info on Iranians? Wow, that’s a surprise!” the Butcher said, sounding intrigued. “Till now, you’ve only asked for info on Indians moving around in this part of the world.”

“It’s different this time. And before you find out about it, let me tell you that the list will contain the names of some top nuclear scientists of your country.”

“You aren’t spying for Israel, are you? Because that’ll put both of us in deep shit.”

“No. I’m not playing from your enemy’s side. I just need this info for some other assignment.”

“Look, I’m not bothered about what you’re going to do with these Iranians. You want to kill them or kidnap them, that’s your choice. But I don’t want any shit on my shirt.”

“Your name won’t crop up anywhere. I can assure you of that.”

“OK. You’ll get your info. Is that all?”

“No. Once we have the details, we need you to do something.”

“That’s like a real Kushwaha,” the Butcher said with a grin. “You want blood. Don’t you? Why keep it till the end?”

Immersed in her thoughts, Seema kept looking at the distant horizon from the car window. A plethora of questions were flooding through her mind. She posed her first question to Divakar.

“Who’s your handler at the IB?”

Divakar turned his head in surprise, as if he wasn’t expecting any conversation with Seema, much less a pointed question.

“You really think I’ll answer that question?” he replied bluntly. “It’s confidential... and none of your business.”

“It is my business,” she fought back. “I’m blindly following a guy whom I know nothing about. Don’t you think I should get out of this car and walk on my own? ...You say you work for the Investigation Bureau. Why don’t you blurt out some names? You have already been burned. So disclosing a few names won’t make much of a difference.”

“A reporter is the last person on earth whom I would reveal my secrets to, Miss. You want some names? See if you can catch hold of a man named A. K. Rastogi. He used to be the Joint Director of IB’s Punjab Operations Cell during the early nineties. Now, he’s retired, but still works as a consultant on a few strategic assignments for the IB. He is a very reclusive man and can be hard to reach,” Divakar said. “Does this make you feel happier?”

“Not fully. But, will do.” Seema didn’t push further. She had a name now. *A. K. Rastogi. Will have to check him out.*

Her eyes fell on an STD-ISD-PCO shop on the road. She told Divakar to

stop and borrowed a few ten-rupee notes from him. When she was about to get down from the car, he said, “Don’t get me wrong. But be careful not to reveal our whereabouts.” Seema pondered over his instruction for a few seconds and then nodded.

She ran over to the booth, with only one man’s number in mind. *Prakash*. In this time of need, his name had popped up in her mind first. She punched in his number.

Prakash picked up the phone after just one ring.

“Prakash? This is Seema.”

“Where are you Seema?” Prakash asked in an anxious voice. “Are you safe?”

“Is my disappearance public news now?” Seema asked in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

“No kidding, girl. I’ve been so worried about you. Where are you?”

“As of now, I can only tell you that I am safe and somewhere in Delhi. Can you do me a big favour?”

“Tell me.”

“Can you please take Vidisha to a safe place?”

“Yes. I will. Don’t worry,” Prakash said. “But, first tell me what’s going on? I know you were investigating the Nitin Tomar murder. So, what happened in Bandhavgarh?”

Seema hesitated for a moment and then replied, “You came to know about this from my office?”

“A missing reporter is not an easy thing to hide. Now listen to me carefully. Just like you, I’ve also been working on the same case. And I have come across some earth shattering disclosures. Some very powerful people are involved in this. People who can make us vanish overnight. We need to put an end to this conspiracy before we too disappear. And for that, we have to meet.”

“You mean you have unravelled the Nitin Tomar murder conspiracy?”

“Not fully. But I have come across some really good sources.”

“Name your source!”

“You know I can’t...”

Seema interjected at the top of her voice, “For God’s sake tell me Prakash. Who is your source?”

“Kunal Chaubey.”

“He’s alive?” She said slowly, lost in her thoughts

“What happened?”

“You’re right! We need to meet,” she muttered. “We certainly need to meet. Wait for my call. I’m in a hurry now, but will get back to you soon. Just one final request...”

“What?”

“Tell Vidisha that I love her more than anything else in the world. And I’m safe.”

“I will. But, you take care.”

“Yes.... And you too,” Seema said, her hand twitching as she placed the receiver. Her heart was beating unusually fast. She wondered whether it was because of excitement or fear.

As soon as she entered the car, she found Divakar looking at her with interest.

“What happened?” Seema asked.

“Your getup seems to have alarmed the shopkeeper,” he said, pointing at the booth owner. “The man is still eyeing us with suspicion.”

Seema looked at her dishevelled clothes and replied, “So what do you suggest we do?”

“We run.”

The first thing Prakash had done after receiving the call from Seema was to call up Dilip More. He instructed his friend to pick up Vidisha from Seema's home and take her to a safe house. They had many contacts in city where the little girl could easily 'go dark.'

That takes care of one major task.

Prakash now began contemplating his next step. The fact that New Delhi was only two stations away didn't offer him any consolation. They couldn't afford to come out in the open. *We need a safe house.* He recalled one of his contacts in the underbelly of New Delhi. *Salim.* The man was a small time document forger living in a small rented flat in the bylanes of Paharganj. He had been the source of many stories for Prakash. In return, on many occasions Prakash had used his connections in the police department to help him escape with minor charges.

He walked over to his seat and said to Mrinal and Kunal, "I think we should get down before the New Delhi station. How about at the Subzi Mandi station?"

"Why?" Mrinal asked.

"What if someone is following us? They would expect us to get down at New Delhi, where they'd be ready with the cavalry."

"You are scaring me," Mrinal said. "But you might've a point."



“Dump New Delhi and drive to Subzi Mandi station immediately! The packages are landing there,” Raman whispered into his phone.

He was flummoxed with the change in plan of his targets who were now huddled up at the compartment door to get down. Subzi Mandi was about to come in five minutes. He realized that that the team from New Delhi could never reach this station in less than thirty minutes. *That means I'll have to follow these bastards on my own. Goddamnit, I don't even have a weapon.*

“Were you able to identify the person in the image?” he asked his henchman. He had stealthily clicked a photo of Prakash while he was talking on the phone and then forwarded it to his team.

“Not yet. We're still trying. He looks vaguely familiar, though.”

“Find out. I want this chapter closed once and for all.”

Seema looked at the unending succession of farmhouses and villas on either sides of the road as her car moved through Chattarpur. Her pangs of hunger and thirst were getting worse in the relentless sun of the afternoon. She couldn't recall what her captors had given her to eat.

Trying to ignore her uneasiness, she looked out the window. Her car had slowed down and was nosing into a three-storied building. It was a hotel. *Acacia Inn*.

"This hotel is your safe house?" Seema enquired.

"It's one of our meeting points," Divakar said, as the car pulled over in a parking space.

"I thought it would be some secluded building in a narrow bylane of the city."

"We have a few of them spread throughout Delhi. The problem with such areas is that you can't move in or out quickly when cornered. You can't have a clear view of people, vehicles and buildings nearby. That's why this hotel is my favourite."

The man on the reception looked at both of them and immediately pulled out a register kept underneath his desk. Divakar signed on it with a name 'Kailash'. The receptionist then handed them two keys for two rooms on the third floor. He didn't escort them to the lift.

"Does this man know about your activities?" Seema said, once they were inside the lift.

“No. His bosses have told him to keep his eyes and ears shut.”

The third floor of the hotel, which was the topmost floor, consisted of a small corridor lined by ten rooms. At the moment, the entire hotel seemed to be unoccupied. Seema noticed that the receptionist had given them quite distant rooms. Her room number was 309, at the corner most end of the corridor. On the other hand, Divakar’s room, numbered 302, was situated at the very beginning, near the staircase.

“I’d told the receptionist to keep some clothes for you in the cupboard. Not sure whether they’ll fit you,” Divakar said when she was just about to enter her room.

“At least they’ll be better than the ones I’m wearing now,” she said, attempting a smile.

“OK then, how about meeting in the next fifteen minutes at your room? I’ll order some lunch.”

Seema nodded. Fifteen minutes was too quick, but then she was not here for a holiday.

The trio rushed out of the platform, making their way through the crowd and luggage heaps. As soon as they were outside the station, a barrage of auto and taxi drivers blocked their way. Prakash didn't want to waste any time. He booked the first taxi that came his way, even without fixing a fare.

"Take us to Paharganj," Prakash said. The driver started his car right away.

No one in their car noticed a figure dashing out of the station behind them and hailing a taxi. Nor did they notice that the man's taxi was trailing right behind their car.

Prakash's phone started ringing within ten minutes of their drive. It was Dilip.

"You found the little girl?" he asked.

"No. I didn't. Diya Shah has taken her away."

"Diya! The chief of Century News?"

"Yeah. Don't you think the girl will be safe with her?"

"Hmmm... I guess so. Just do me one favour. Call up Diya and tell her to get some security. Who knows, she may actually need it."

"I'm doing it right away."

Being a reporter, Seema was accustomed to getting ready in a jiffy. She cleaned herself up in flat ten minutes and then got into the ladies tracksuit she found in the cupboard. *Fits me perfectly!*

To comb her hair, she stood in front of the mirror, but immediately wished she hadn't. Her eyes were sunken, cheek and collarbones protruding. She thought she looked like a drug addict in rehabilitation. She grimaced and let out a sigh. *What have they done to me?*

There was a ring on her door. Relieved at being distracted from her ugly reflection, she walked towards the door and opened it. A waiter in white overalls and black waistcoat stood outside, holding a few plates in his hand. Divakar, dressed in a blue T-shirt and khakis, stood behind him.

"I'm sorry to have ordered veg. noodles without asking for your preference," he said, getting into her room after the waiter. "There weren't too many options available anyways."

"I can devour anything at this moment," Seema said with a smile. "Anything."

After the waiter left, both of them picked a plate each.

"It feels as if I'm having good food after years," she said, stuffing noodles in her mouth.

"And surprisingly, it has only been a few days."

She said nothing. She didn't want to remember those terrible days.

Changing the topic, she said, "Thanks for the dress. Felt relieved

dumping those blood-stained clothes.”

Divakar grinned. “Believe me; I’m more relieved than you are.”

When they were finished with their noodles, his face began assuming a grim look. He cleared his throat and said, “Let’s talk business now. We know about this conspiracy only in parts. You know from your experiences and I know from mine. We need to come to the same page. I’ve told you, my story begins with the IB sniffing some serious crime and sending me into this organization. But, how did you come this far?”

“It all began with Nitin Tomar’s murder...” She told him in brief about how her investigation took her from Allahabad to New Delhi to Bandhavgarh.

After listening to her story, Divakar made a brooding face and said, “So, the only credible source you had was Dr Kalyan Ghosh and he’s dead now?”

Seema nodded.

“Dead people aren’t going to help us,” Divakar sneered. “Do you have a source who is alive and kicking?”

“There is only one man I can think of. His name is Prakash Sinha, a reporter in Globe News. He might have a few sources of his own. But, don’t expect me to bring my friend here and put him in danger.”

“If your friend is chasing the same enemies as us, we needn’t put him in danger. He’s pretty much there already.”

“Still, I can’t...”

“Look Seema, the clock is ticking. Even though we’ve managed to survive till now, I don’t think we can play this hide-and-seek game for long. Sooner or later, our enemies will find us and neutralize us. Our only hope lies in the story we’re going to tell the world. And what do we’ve with us presently? A half-baked conspiracy theory! Do you think that’s enough to get these guys behind bars?” He took a deep breath. “One chance – that’s all we are going to get against these bastards. If we fail, we better leave this goddamned country, find a rat-hole and hide there for the rest of our lives. Because these sons-of-bitches aren’t going to let us go unpunished. So, if there’s anything that ensures that these guys are going to jail, we must do it. We need to have every fucking source, every fucking proof under this roof, tonight!”

Seema looked away, thinking. She finally made a decision. “See, I’m going to ask Prakash if he’s willing to come here. But, if he doesn’t want to,

it's his choice. I won't force him."

"Fair enough."

Seema went over to the phone kept beside the bed. She wanted to talk to Prakash badly and ask him about Vidisha. "Can I have some privacy please?"

Divakar hesitated for a moment, but then stood up and went out of the room.

Seema dialled Prakash's number. Her ears were filled with jarring noises of honking horns as he picked up the phone. She asked, "Where are you Prakash?"

"I am... sort of travelling."

"Did you manage to get to my daughter?"

"Your daughter is with Diya Shah. With you missing, I guess she took Vidisha to her home."

Seema felt relieved and thankful to her boss. Diya lived in a well-guarded mansion, which meant Vidisha would be safe.

"Thank you Prakash. I didn't know who else to approach for this."

"Come on, Seema. You know you need not thank me. Now, tell me when can we meet?"

"How about... now?"

"Now? Where are you exactly?"

"I am in a hotel in Chattarpur. And I have an Intelligence Bureau contractor with me who had infiltrated the ranks of this organization."

"Do you feel safe there? I can help you get to a safer location if you want."

"I won't feel safe anywhere till we're done with these bastards. We really need to figure out a way to nail them. From what they've done to me, I know these people are capable of every ghastly act possible."

"What have they done to you?" Prakash asked horrified.

"I'll tell you everything when we meet."

"I'm coming right now. What's the place?"

"Acacia Inn at Chattarpur. Room no. 309... Bring Kunal too."

Prakash told Mrinal and Kunal about Seema and her Bandhavgarh misadventure.

Kunal looked shaken. "They are still operating in Bandhavgarh?" he said, with fear in his eyes.

"They are pretty much everywhere, it seems," Prakash said.

"Let's go meet Seema, then. Tell the driver to change course," Kunal said. "We are going."

Prakash looked at Mrinal with uncertain eyes, waiting for his reaction. "I'll not force you to come with me, Mrinal. You've already helped me a lot."

A mocking smile formed on Mrinal's lips. "You know what I think about you?" he burst out. "You consider yourself a really big smartass reporter who just clicks his fingers... and 'poof'... things get done. Who are you – 'Clark Kent'? What was this Clark Kent doing when he was being chased by thugs yesterday night? You need my help. You know it. So your big-ass Clark Kent ego shouldn't feel hurt before asking for my help. We're in this shit together. So, we're going together."

"And by the way, I won't charge overtime for this," he added.

Prakash grinned. So did Mrinal.

"You're a psycho, you know?" Prakash said.

"You're the second person to call me that," Mrinal replied with a straight face. "The first was my boss. I punched him before I left my job."

Prakash laughed. Even Kunal had a smile on his lips.

“Driver *bhai*! We have a change of plan. Can you please take us to Chattarpur?”

Raman’s phone started ringing. It was Patil, the leader of his support team.

“We are near Subzi Mandi station, Raman. Where are you?” Patil asked.

“You’re late,” Raman growled. “Move fast! I’m near Sadar Bazaar train yard.”

“We’re trying. But, there’s a lot of traffic here,” Patil said, before hanging up.

Raman was unhappy and restless. He never liked chasing his targets and reporting about their whereabouts. He was a killer, not a goddamn spy. *I hope this is my last assignment.*

“Prakash is coming. Possibly, with a major witness for this case,” Seema said.

Divakar had returned to her room after her call ended. She sat on the bed, while he had eased into a wooden chair.

“Major witness? Who?” he asked.

“Kunal Chaubey. He was one of the first subjects of the Doctor’s trials.”

Divakar was surprised. “Where did your friend find that guy?”

“I don’t know. We’ll soon find out in our war room.”

She felt amused with her choice of words. She had seen many war rooms in her life as a reporter. The toughest one till now had involved the release of a sting operation video against a powerful politician. The old man led one of the major parties forming the coalition government at the centre. In the sting video, he was caught boasting about arm-twisting the central government to award a mega expressway contract to one of his relatives. He was really furious when he found out about this operation and used all his power to stop Century News from airing that video. They were threatened with lawsuits. There were smear campaigns against their reporters. A couple of attacks involved physical harm to them too.

So before airing the video, her team decided to brainstorm and strategize in a war room for a last ditch fight. They relooked at every piece of evidence, prepared their defence plan against all possible lawsuits and a probable backlash from the government. It was one hell of a fight they put up.

But looking back, she realized that what they were going to do now was way more dangerous. Their present opponents seemed to have an army of professional killers. They were omnipresent. *One can't become such a powerful entity without direct help from the politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. Who is behind all this?*

“Many questions have been nagging me since my capture,” Seema said, with a frown. “How can a group of people run a drug manufacturing facility and a clinical trials program without the permission of the government?... Somehow, I feel that there has to be a legitimate face of this organization, under whose shadow they’re carrying out their evil exercises. What do you think?”

Divakar nodded on listening to her question. He said, “You missed one part. Do you know how much it costs to bring a blockbuster drug out into the market? More than a billion dollars. Almost half of that goes into clinical trials. That makes it about five hundred million dollars. Moreover, it takes a decade for the research and development process. Even if we assume that they bought this molecule from some other company, the price will still run into millions. So, whoever we are after seems to have deep pockets.”

“Hmmm. That’s true. But you’ve been tracking these people for long. You must’ve heard something about the people at the top of this organization. Any names, any aliases which you’ve come across?”

“Frankly speaking Seema, I was only a security guy in their facility. I might’ve seen the bad guys get in and get out of that factory, but I don’t know what exactly they did inside. Most of the inner rooms of the facility were off-limits for people like me. I think they took in only the most loyal people in their inner sanctum. Maybe if you hadn’t come, I’d have got that chance soon. And I...” His phone started ringing. He made an apologetic face and walked out of the room.

Seema remained seated on her bed. She looked at the wall clock mounted over the TV. Prakash should be here any moment.

Raman's phone started to ring again. It was Sultan this time.

"Where are you Raman?"

"I am near Mehrauli. This trio is making me drive around the whole city."

"Pull over."

"I guess you didn't hear me. I'm right on the tail of these three bastards. You don't want me to lose them, do you?"

"I said pull over right now," Sultan ordered. "Let the back-up team pick you up."

Raman was exasperated. *Fuck Sultan. He's been forcing me to make one mistake after another.*

"I'm not pulling over. Let your team catch up with my car first."

"I respect your skills a lot Raman. Don't make me lose that respect. Do what I say," Sultan growled.

"OK." Raman said, clenching his fist in anger.

"And don't you dare defy my orders again," his boss said before closing their conversation.

Asshole. Fight me one-on-one and I'll show you who's boss.

He told the driver to stop the car and got out of it. In a few minutes, a black Tata Safari pulled over in front of him. Its driver gestured him to move in. He ran and got in quickly. The team leader was sitting right beside him.

"What's going on, Patil?" Raman complained. "Why did Sultan stop the chase?"

“I’ll tell you. But first have a look at this,” the team leader said, pointing towards the boot of the SUV.

Raman looked behind. In a moment, his anguish faded away. He was looking at his weapons kit.

Seema ran over to her window when she heard the sound of a vehicle getting into the hotel compound. Through the window glass, she saw three men come out of the car. One of them was Prakash. She felt elated to see a known face after so long.

Seema waited with bated breath for a knock on her door. What must've been about ten minutes, felt like an hour! And when she finally heard the knock, she ran over to the door and opened it. Prakash was standing outside.

Seema stepped forward, intending to hug him tightly and cry her heart out, but her sobriety did not allow for it. Prakash came in and took her hands in his. His eyes reflected the same pain she had in hers.

"You look so... frail," Prakash said looking into her eyes, his voice almost a whisper.

"Never knew they would kidnap me," Seema said, choked up. Her eyes were teary. "I should've known."

"When our story is out, these bastards will have nowhere to hide."

Seema nodded and wiped her eyes. Her gaze moved towards the other two men standing behind her friend.

Prakash turned around and said, "Meet Mrinal Dutta and Kunal Chaubey," pointing towards them one by one.

Though Seema already knew that one of them was Kunal, she was still unable to hide her astonishment. "Kunal Chaubey!" she said with a strange thrill in her voice. "You've been lost for eight years."

“Now I’m back to haunt them,” he said, nodding. “How did you end up in Bandhavgarh, by the way?”

“Long story. Do you know Dr Kalyan Ghosh?”

“Did he send you on this chase?” Kunal asked with surprise. “Where is he nowadays? I want to meet him.”

“He is dead,” Seema replied, stone-faced. “Beheaded by these criminals.”

Kunal closed his eyes in sorrow.

Before Seema could say anything, she saw Divakar at the door. He looked at all of them with curiosity. She introduced him to them.

“It’s quite interesting to hear that two reporters who know each other so well and were working on the same case, ventured out into two different directions and yet came together by fate,” Divakar said with a grin.

“I should thank you for bringing us all together,” Seema said with excitement. “We have a couple of eyewitnesses now and a man who knows how they function internally. Fit these things together and we have a story.”

She noticed a frown on Prakash’s face. His forehead was creased. Since the moment she introduced Divakar to him, he appeared lost in his thoughts. *What is bothering you?*

Divakar took out a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and passed it around. Mrinal took one. He now pulled out a lighter, gave it to Mrinal and started walking towards the window.

“I think we need a laptop with Internet connection to document everything we know,” he said, sliding the windowpane and letting fresh air in. “I have one in my room. Let me bring it in.”

“That’s great. It seems you are prepared with a lot of things already,” Prakash said with sarcasm. “You can be our most important source, you know why?”

“Why?” Divakar asked.

“Because I think all of us know only about the incidents which have happened with us. We don’t have any names. But you’ve been inside their organization. You must’ve met people, seen them doing bad things. Why don’t you give me a name? This man...” Prakash said pointing towards Mrinal, “... can dig out some really nice dirt about people.”

Mrinal shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

Divakar didn’t answer. With an uneasy face, he looked at Seema for some support, but found only questioning eyes staring back at him.

“Who did you take orders from, Divakar?” Prakash interrogated again.

“I don’t know his name. We used aliases,” Divakar replied.

“How did you get into their organization?” Prakash pushed him further.

Seema looked at Prakash. *What’s he doing?*

“IB got me in. They have been tracking this organization since long.”

“Who in IB?” Prakash barked.

Divakar was getting worked up. He spat, “What the fuck is this? 20 questions?”

Prakash pressed him further. “I asked you a simple question. Who in IB helped you get inside?”

Seema decided to cool things off. “I guess it was an Ex-IB Joint Director. A. K. Rastogi, if I’m not wrong.” She looked at Divakar for approval.

“Hey, hey, hey! Why are you guys so interested in my past?” Divakar said. “Seema, I think you should tell your smartass buddy that we’re all on the same side here. OK? I don’t like someone questioning me like that.”

Seema made an apologetic face, but Divakar ignored her and began fidgeting with his mobile phone, not looking up.

Prakash was in no mood to relent, though. “Mrinal, why don’t you go and look up this man called A.K. Rastogi. Let’s check out who this man is,” Prakash said loud enough for Divakar’s ears. “I hope our friend here can help you with his laptop.”

“What is all this?” Divakar yelled. “I thought we were all here to tie up loose ends and build an airtight case against this organization. What you’re doing is digging up dirt about me!”

“Because I think you’re hiding something from us! And I have to find out what it is. Mrinal, go!”

Mrinal started walking towards the door. But, he had taken hardly a few steps when Divakar grabbed his shirt collar and shoved him back with force.

Seema cried, “Divakar!”

“Shut up, bitch! I am done tolerating you guys.” Divakar took out his pistol from the small of his back.

But before he could point it at anyone, Prakash jumped at him like a tiger. He caught his weapon with his left fist and thrust his right shoulder into his chest in a rugby-style tackle. Both of them crashed on the floor, Prakash lying on top of Divakar. Mrinal kicked the latter’s right hand with all his might, flinging his pistol away.

“Motherf...” Divakar raised his head up and slammed it into Prakash’s nose.

Ahhh. The reporter shrieked, blood dripping from his nose. Before he could recover, Divakar hit him again on the same point with his head. Awww. In agony, Prakash rolled down his chest and lay flat on the ground.

Divakar took out his mobile phone while still lying on the floor. He dialled a number, smirked and said loudly, addressing everyone in the room, “Meet you in another world, buddies. Good bye!”

Kunal, who had been standing at a corner and watching the proceedings till now with caution, understood what was going to happen. “It’s an ambush!” he yelled and charged at Divakar.

But, before he could reach him, there was a loud boom. He yelped and fell on the floor like a dead pigeon. His head bore a golf ball sized hole, blood gushing out from it in torrents. He was dead.

“There’s a fucking sniper outside!” Prakash screamed, holding his nose. He was pointing at the window opened some time back by Divakar.

Everyone got down on all fours as a barrage of gunfire erupted from outside. The bullets smashed through the windows and struck the walls, dropping chunks of glass, plaster and cement all over.

Seema was too stunned to react. She looked around in panic. Mrinal lay in a foetal position below one of the windows, clutching his head. Divakar had taken up a crawling position resembling a soldier in a trench. *Bastard.*

Prakash was crouching on the floor behind a chair. He gestured to Seema, indicating that he was about to attack Divakar. Carefully avoiding the line of fire, he picked up the chair and smacked it with full force on Divakar’s head. Thakk! There was loud thud – the sound of a cracking skull.

Divakar cried and rolled over, writhing in pain. He was facing Prakash. Blood streamed into his eyes, making him shake his head to clear his vision. He was losing consciousness. In a few seconds, he slumped over the floor, lying in his own blood.

“We have to run!” Prakash yelled.

BOOK 3

Raman was crouching on the terrace of an under-construction building, only half a kilometre away from Acacia Inn. A plume of smoke curled out of the barrel of his Dragunov SVD long range rifle. It had pumped seven rounds into a window on the Inn's third floor just now. He counted only one hit however, quite unhappy with the way things had gone here.

Firstly, he was upset not being told in advance about this ambush. *Sultan. Son-of-a-bitch. You knew where this trio was going, but still kept me in the dark.*

The second problem was that he had got a very small timeframe to reconnoitre the area and locate a vantage point to take the shot. The under-construction building was the only place he could find in a hurry. Although the structure was not completely deserted, he decided to use it, taking the grave risk of being noticed by people. The rooftop was splattered with moist lime, cement and plaster. It made him rule out a 'prone' position for sniping, the one in which the shooter lies flat on his chest. He couldn't afford to leave clues for the police. Besides, he knew that the prone position wouldn't give him a clear view of the target. The 'kneeling' position would have to do.

His compromises didn't end there. The original plan was that Sultan's agent Divakar would keep conversing with the targets till the trap was closed around them. A ground team would have surrounded the hotel while Raman had them in the crosshairs of his Dragunov. At Divakar's phone call, the ambush would have begun.

But, things did not happen that way. Even before the ground team could reach the hotel and surround it, he received a call on his mobile phone. It was a green signal, which meant he had to shoot. He complied.

Raman pondered over the two options in front of him: either remain put, watching over the targets in the hope of taking them down if they came into view; or rush out and support the ground team. He wanted to go for the first one, but then recalled he was not in a safe place. *These bloody construction workers can remember my face.* Even the police could trap him in the construction zone.

He looked through the rifle scope for one last time. The crosshairs brushed past a TV and the top of a cupboard inside the hotel room. *No movement of people. So, no use sitting here.* He disassembled his rifle quickly and ran downstairs.

“Oh my God! This was a fucking trap all along,” Seema screamed. “That’s why I could escape so easily. They let me go!”

“And they lured us in. To ambush us together,” Prakash said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Seema sobbed and moved her eyes towards Kunal’s mangled body. Lying in a puddle of pulpy mass, his head looked smaller than before, as if his skull had caved in. She closed her eyes in disgust.

“Our main witness is dead!” she grunted. “I’ve put you guys in danger too.”

Mrinal interjected in panic, “Hey people, we can do the talking and crying later. Let’s get the hell out of here first. I don’t want to get cooked in this gunfire.”

“Our escape won’t be easy,” Prakash said with a grim face. “We might be surrounded.”

“Yesssss... you are surr...oun...ded.”

All three of them looked towards Divakar. He was lying on the ground with unmoving eyes pointed at the roof.

Prakash turned his head 180 degrees, his eyes looking for the pistol Mrinal had kicked away. It was lying aligned with the wall, buried in a pile of cement and plaster. He picked it up, pointed it at Divakar and snapped, “How many men?”

Divakar didn’t say anything. He just gave a smirk. His face was a bloody

mess from the deep gash caused by the hit from the chair. Blood was dripping from his head onto the floor.

“Tell me you son-of-a-bitch. How many men have come for the hunt?” Prakash shifted the gun to his left hand and punched him hard on his face. The force was so strong that his hand began to ache.

Divakar’s lower lip was cut badly. He groaned in pain and replied, “Seven... maybe eight.”

Prakash thought for a few moments. He got an idea. Looking around, he found Divakar’s mobile lying nearby. He picked it up and said, “You’re going to call your men from your mobile and tell them that we’ve escaped. You got me? You need to send them on a wild goose chase.”

Divakar shook his head in refusal.

Prakash got agitated. This man was wasting precious time. The attackers could rush in any moment. Gritting his teeth in anger, he thrust the pistol’s barrel into Divakar’s mouth. “You say ‘no’ once more and I swear to God, I’ll put a bullet in your head.”

Seeing a faint glimpse of fear in his eyes, Prakash looked at the list of dialled numbers in the mobile. The last two numbers belonged to men named Raman and Patil.

“Who should I call? Raman or Patil?” Prakash roared. He removed the barrel from Divakar’s mouth, taking care not to press the trigger.

“Patil,” Divakar said, gasping for breath.

Prakash dialled Patil’s number and handed over the mobile phone to him. “Tell him that we escaped through the backside wall.”

Divakar kept lying on the floor while he took the call.

“Patil... No, only one is dead... The remaining three have escaped! ... No, I am not in pursuit. One of them injured me badly... Rush into the road behind the hotel. I think they have jumped over the backside wall... Tell Raman also... No, I don’t need any help now. Deep Alpha,” he talked into the phone and then hung up.

“You sure they aren’t coming here?” Prakash asked.

“No,” Divakar said, losing breath. “They... they may still decide to come here.”

Prakash looked at Seema and Mrinal and said, “Time to run.”

“What if the sniper is still waiting for us to raise our heads?” Seema asked, pointing towards the smashed window.

Prakash nodded in agreement, turning his head towards the door of the room, “We won’t raise our heads, in that case.”

Raman was just out of the building when his phone started ringing. *Patil.*
“Give me some good news, Patil.”

“I have bad news. The targets have escaped by climbing over the back wall. Divakar turned out to be a sissy. He got thrashed by one of them and is now lying injured in the hotel.”

“Damn! Are you in pursuit?”

“Yes. We’ve changed direction and will emerge in the road behind the hotel. Let’s hope they are still there when we reach.”

“Make it fast. We can’t let them go,” Raman said and then added with a suspicious tone, “I still can’t believe that they were able to climb that wall. That too so quickly. It looked pretty high from my rifle scope.”

“I was also a bit surprised.”

“Are you sure Divakar wasn’t speaking under duress? Did he mention some code word which may have seemed odd to you?”

Patil thought for few seconds and replied in a slow and doubtful manner, “He did use the words ‘Deep Alpha’. I thought it must be his code name...”

“That is a duress code we use internally, you fool! How the hell aren’t you aware of it?”

“I... I’m new here. You know that, Raman.”

“Don’t give me excuses, motherfucker!” Raman said, scowling. “Tell me how far have you come from the hotel?” *These moronic cívies!*

“We can get there in ten... I mean five minutes.”

“Then move!”

“We are already on our way,” Patil said, trying hard to calm Raman. He then added, “And... I’m so sorry, Raman,” sounding like a driver who had just dented his employer’s costliest car.

“I will deal with you later. First, I need to get back into my position.” Raman hung up. He started running back towards the same building he had got down from.

1 minute to reach the top floor. 30 seconds to assemble the rifle. 30 more seconds to focus and spot. That makes it two minutes. Run, Raman, run.

Prakash looked at Seema as she cat-crawled out of the hotel room. He was standing in the corridor, having come out of the room the same way as she was doing now. On opening the door, he had expected it to explode with the next barrage of gunshots. Thankfully, it didn't happen.

"We need to get to the lift," he said to Seema and sprinted towards the other end of the corridor.

"Keep your head down," she shouted, pointing at a large window on the wall beside the lift.

Prakash lowered his head in response. The window was large enough for a sniper to spot him and pump in a few bullets. He reached the lift. Crouching in front of it, he pressed the up button and looked at Seema. She was walking towards him with a stooping position. Mrinal was following her.

The lift door opened and Prakash rushed in. He was joined by Seema and Mrinal in a second.

"I don't want to move into another ambush," Mrinal said, as the lift started to go down.

Prakash nodded. His friend's fears were not unfounded. He bit his lips in tension as the lift reached the ground floor and its doors began to open.

The lift area was empty. *Thank God!* "Watch out for people with weapons," he whispered and walked out.

With careful steps, he reached the reception area. There was no one sitting over the desk. *Everyone's involved.* From his position, he could see the

main gate of the compound clearly. He turned towards Seema and Mrinal and said, “We’ll have to get out of the front gate and find some conveyance.”

All of them dashed towards the main gate – Prakash followed by Seema and Mrinal. Prakash reached the gate first and opened the latch. As soon as he swivelled the door, he heard the sound of a ‘crack’ and then Seema’s shriek. *No!* He immediately turned around and stood there agape with horror.

Mrinal was lying on the ground, with Seema crouched and looking at him. *Oh! No... No... No!*

“He’s hit. The sniper is still there!” Seema yelled with terror in her eyes.

“Tell me he’s not dead!” He fell to his knees and dragged himself towards Mrinal. He saw his friend writhing in pain, his shirt soaked with blood. *You’re alive.* There was a thumbnail sized hole on his left shoulder, a few inches from the heart. He slid his fingers behind Mrinal’s neck and checked for any exit wounds on his back. There was one. *Good.*

“Just hang on, *dost.* We’re going to get help,” he said, unsure whether his friend could hear him. He then instructed, “Seema, use this gate as a shield, move out and hire a vehicle. I’ll follow you with Mrinal.”

She nodded and crawled out of the main gate. Prakash took Mrinal’s hands in his own and pulled him towards the gate like a sack of potatoes. He wanted to ensure that they remained in cover from the sniper’s range. The metal gate was their saviour now. Even a few seconds’ wait felt like an era.

Seema finally appeared. “I could only find an auto,” she said in a low-pitch, apologetic voice.

“There is no time to think. Let’s go,” Prakash said. He held Mrinal by his torso while Seema held his legs. They shoved him into the auto-rickshaw and then got in themselves.

The driver looked at them with shock. “What is this, Madam? What are you guys getting me involved in?”

“Please, *bhaiya*, help us. We are reporters and have been attacked by some wrong people. Just take us out of here,” Seema pleaded.

The driver thought for a moment, unable to decide. He then shook his head and started the auto. “I won’t take you far,” he barked. “Keep looking for a cab while I drive. I’ll drop you once you find one.”

She nodded.

“Where are you guys?” Raman roared into his phone. He talked while his eyes were on the riflescope.

“We are just about to reach,” Patil replied.

“Where?”

“The... the hotel.”

“They are leaving, you idiot. Drive fast!” Raman snapped. “I have slowed them down for you.”

“How so?”

“Pumped a bullet into one of them.”

“So, only two of them remain?”

“No, I’m not sure whether the target is dead. It was not a headshot. One of them appeared in my scope and I pressed the trigger immediately.”

“Ohhh... but...”

“Wait... wait... wait,” Raman cut him off mid-way in his sentence, his eyes still on the scope. “I think they just got into an auto. I can see an auto-rickshaw nosing out of the main gate.”

“OK. Great. We are going after them,” Patil said and hung up.

Raman dropped his mobile on the ground. *One final shot.* He took a long breath in, and did not breathe out. He turned his rifle slowly, its scope tracing the auto-rickshaw’s line of motion. With a minor adjustment of the focus, he brought the vehicle’s linen covered back into the cross-hairs.

His finger caressed the trigger. The shot was only a millisecond away.

He heard some commotion behind him. Turning around, he saw a couple of workers standing near the staircase, looking at him with suspicion. He sprung from his position, dismantled the gun and wrapped up his things. For once, he thought about killing the witnesses, but decided against it. *That'll complicate things.* He rushed out of the building, took out his mobile and dialled Patil's number.

“Patil, pick me up from the main road. I'll be there in a few seconds.”

Seema was looking at a half-awake Mrinal with concern. The handkerchief she had tied over his wound had turned crimson in colour. “We have to find a hospital immediately. He’s losing blood.”

Prakash nodded. He knew time was running out for Mrinal. A wave of guilt swept through him. Mrinal had come to help only at his insistence. And he was going to die now. He looked at him. His eyes were narrowed to slits and his breathing had slowed.

“We are going to save you Mrinal,” Prakash whispered in his ears. “Just hang on.”

He shifted his gaze from Mrinal to look at the road. Just then, he glimpsed something odd in the driver’s side mirror: an SUV, about half a kilometer away, moving at an unusually high speed. His eyes became wide with fear.

“Drive fast, *bhaiya*, people are coming after us,” Prakash yelled.

“You guys have put me in trouble,” complained the driver uneasily. “How fast can an auto run?” He twisted the accelerator to its maximum. In response, the engine growled like an alien creature. The vehicle shook and swayed as its speed touched eighty kilometres per hour.

Prakash looked at the mirror. The SUV was catching up fast. *We can’t run away*. He felt a nudge on his hand. It was Mrinal. He was mumbling something.

Prakash brought his ears near his friend’s lips.

“There’s something... in the small of my back.... Take it out,” Mrinal whispered, with short gasps.

Prakash frowned, but still eased his hand behind Mrinal’s back. He felt something hard and metallic. *A pistol!* He pulled it out and felt his way around its trigger. “You picked up Divakar’s gun?” he asked with surprise.

Mrinal nodded. He had a faint smile on his lips.

“You’re an intelligent bastard!” Prakash said. “But, I don’t know how much it’s going to help.”

He looked at the mirror again. The SUV was only a few dozen meters away. He saw the barrel of a rifle protruding from its rear seat.

Before he could figure out how his puny pistol would match a bunch of rifle-toting men, the big vehicle curved sharply like a cheetah and blocked the path of another auto-rickshaw running parallel to it. The latter stopped with a loud screech. Men carrying guns sprung out of the SUV and thrust them into the smaller vehicle.

Prakash realized what had just happened. Their pursuers had waylaid the wrong vehicle. It would be one minute before the men realized their mistake and resumed their pursuit. *Bhaiya, drive faster. Drive faster.*

“Have they ambushed the wrong auto?” Seema asked, intrigued by the scene behind them.

“Yes. We’re next,” Prakash replied. For once, he thought of getting down and running into the bylanes. *But that might prove disastrous. They’ll hunt us down easily.*

“What are we going to do? ... Are you going to use that?” she asked with fearful eyes, pointing at the pistol he was holding.

“I don’t know.”

The SUV had started again and was quickly closing in on them. Their auto-rickshaw was grinding its wheels at eighty-five kilometres an hour. The big vehicle took only half a minute to cover the distance between them. The chase was over.

It was time to do something.

Prakash’s heart was beating rapidly. He gripped the pistol hard. In a second, the SUV emerged from behind and began running parallel to their vehicle.

Let’s do it, then.

He fired two bullets at the front wheel.

In that scary, spine-chilling moment when his vehicle veered out of control, Raman knew his time was up. With eyes full of horror, he looked at the man who had just fired a few bullets into the front tyre and sealed his fate. There was going to be no retirement, no hiding away in a blissful countryside.

He closed his eyes for a second and found himself lying on the ground under the dusky sky, staring down the barrel of an HK417 held at his face by a masked man. It was the same dream he often used to have. But, to his surprise, he could actually feel the cold touch of metal against his chin.

“This is the end,” the assailant hissed.

“Who... who are you?”

In the mouth of the balaclava, he could see a smile form on the man’s lips. He removed his mask in an unhurried manner.

Raman shook his head, perplexed. He gazed at his enemy with bulging eyes. “Your face... you are... you are...”

“I am you.”

The man pressed his finger on the trigger. Bang!

Raman opened his eyes in an instant. He was panting, his stomach churning, bile rising up his throat. In slow motion, he saw his vehicle glide towards a concrete wall. The wall kept coming near and near till there was complete darkness.

The SUV collided head-on with the wall of a farmhouse. The impact was brutal. The front part of the big vehicle was pulverized in a second. One tire got flung almost ten meters away.

The auto-rickshaw driver pushed his brake with all his might, making it screech to a halt hardly twenty meters from the accident site.

“What... what the hell have you done?” the driver yelled. He was aghast. “Get down from my auto. *Niklo!*”

“This is the moment,” Prakash said, clenching his jaws. “Get out and run, Seema! I’ll bring Mrinal.”

Seema was too shocked to react. She budged only when Prakash pushed her outwards. She got down from the vehicle and then helped Mrinal get

down. Prakash was the last one to emerge.

He eyed the accident site. A plume of smoke was coming out from the place and a small crowd had gathered in front of it – some looking at the obliterated SUV and some looking suspiciously at their auto-rickshaw. He decided to ignore them. There were bigger things at stake.

He wedged Mrinal's head in his right armpit and passed his left hand around his neck like a necklace. "We will have to walk like this for a few moments till we find a cab," he whispered to his friend.

Mrinal nodded. He looked tired.

Prakash scanned the place for any exit routes. He saw an alley on the opposite side of the road. It led into a few bylanes a hundred meters away.

"Seema, let's get into that alley. I'm coming behind you," he said.

Seema complied and strode into the alley. Prakash plodded behind, carrying Mrinal who seemed to have lost all his energy. She was now walking almost fifty meters ahead of them. At one point, she took a left turn and disappeared into a bylane.

After a few minutes, when Prakash reached the mouth of that bylane, he saw her standing with face towards them about twenty meters away. She had a look of terror in her eyes.

Prakash noticed a couple of cars parked behind her. In a second, the doors of the cars opened and 5-6 men came out. They were holding rifles and pistols – all aimed at him and Mrinal.

Prakash closed his eyes. *Game over.*

Sultan's lips curved into a smile as he watched the breaking news on Al Jazeera: Another Iranian nuclear scientist dead. Govt. claims 'accidental death'.

The news anchor said that Kamran Ebrahimi, a retired nuclear scientist, was killed in a car explosion that took place in the basement parking of his apartment. He was 76. Previously, he oversaw a program at the Natanz uranium enrichment complex in Isfahan province in Iran. Hinting at assassination, not accidental death, the anchor expressed surprise at the killing of an old man, who supposedly had no contact with the Iranian nuclear program for the last four years.

The news then displayed a list of Iranian nuclear scientists, who had been assassinated in the last five years. It concluded with the testimony of a few Iranian security analysts who hinted at Israel's hand in this assassination. According to an analyst, the Israelis might have been helped by the PMI, People's Mujahedin of Iran, a terrorist organization in Iran. US involvement too, was suspected.

Sultan grinned. This was good news. Qasab had done his job, making the assassination look like a continuation of attacks against Iranian nuclear scientists. The blame had as usual passed on to Israel, PMI and the US. Any attack on Israeli nuclear scientists would now look like retaliation from Iran. *That keeps us out of the picture.*

There was some movement behind him. He turned around and saw Vinod

Kushwaha standing.

“Good job, Sultan. That was swift and smooth,” Vinod said in a low voice, almost whispering. “But, why choose this old man?”

“Because he was an easy kill,” Sultan shrugged, smiling. “Kamran Ebrahimi was retired and used to live without any personal security.”

“How many people know about our role in this?”

“No one except you and me,” Sultan replied. “Not even your old man.”

“Good. What about the Bangalore mission?”

“On track. We will do it tonight. Unless you tell me to stand down.”

“And why would I say so?”

“Don’t you think that the Iranians might call off our mission after knowing about Kamran’s assassination? Any attack on Israeli people now will obviously point at Iranians however strongly they deny it.”

“That’s not going to happen. I had a discussion with Massoud a few minutes ago. He says our mission is a ‘go’. Iranians are really pissed off with Israel. They want revenge. They have been trying to give back the favour to Israel for years. But all they have achieved is a series of ludicrous failures. Their best chance is now. The Israeli scientists are already in India, out of their comfort zone. So, the Iranians realize that today may be the day to give the Zionists a taste of their own medicine.”

“Hmmm... But the Israelis have become cautious now, after Kamran’s death. They would be fools not to prepare for a backlash from Iran. I’ve heard that a team from the Mossad is already in India, to protect their scientists.”

“Thank God they didn’t pull out their scientists from India. Otherwise, all our plans would’ve come to naught. And as far as Mossad goes, we can tackle them in our country,” Vinod said while leaving the room.

Sultan did not react to Vinod’s boast. He knew he needed additional preparation to handle Mossad’s agents. *Let’s take care of the more pressing issue first.* He took out his mobile and checked for any missed calls. *No calls from Raman and Patil.* He called up Raman. *Switched off.*

He frowned and dialled Patil’s number. *Again switched off.*

Worried, he called one of his men in Delhi. “Why are Raman and Patil’s phones switched off?”

“It’s bad news, Sultan. Four of our members are dead including Patil and Raman. They got into a horrific accident near our Chattarpur safe house,” the

henchman replied.

Sultan closed his eyes, absorbing the shock. He felt rage build up under his skin. *This is getting out of control.* “What about the targets?”

“Kunal Chaubey is dead. One more is heavily injured. But... but the other two targets managed to escape with him.”

“You mean you’ve no idea where they might be?”

“None as of now.”

“Get another team and carry on with the pursuit,” Sultan snapped. “And did you dig up the targets’ identities?”

“Besides Seema Sharma, we’ve identified one more. His name is Prakash Sinha, a reporter for Globe News.”

“Wow, two fucking journos are playing this game with us,” Sultan muttered. “What about the third guy?”

“We’re still working on him.”

“Find out quickly.”

“Where are you taking us?” Prakash enquired.

He had been blindfolded. So were Seema and Mrinal. They were sitting in the rear side of a Mahindra Scorpio, which had been moving since half an hour.

“I told you. No questions,” one of his captors growled.

“My friend is dying,” Prakash said. “He needs a doctor.”

“You open your bloody mouth once more, and I’ll blow your knee-cap away,” the man barked. “Boss will decide what to do with you people. If your friend can survive till then, well and good. Else...”

Prakash stopped bugging them. He wanted to ask the man who his boss was, but then thought otherwise. *I’ll soon know.*

Behind the blindfold, his eyes were weary with tiredness. The darkness was suffocating. As he leaned back on his seat with anxiety, he felt a warm touch on his left hand. It was Seema. He held her palm in his.

Are we going to get out of this alive?

Over the years, Hotel Le Regalia has emerged as the preferred destination for global summits and symposiums in Bangalore. It houses one of the largest convention centers in South India. So, when Bangalore decided to host the 6th Nuclear Science Summit, Le Regalia was the obvious choice.

The first day of the three-day summit had begun amid much fanfare, but not without the usual protests from environmentalists and nuclear disarmament supporters. Bangalore Police had placed barricades outside the hotel to prevent the protestors from entering its compound. A couple of water cannon vehicles were ready as part of contingency measures.

Unlike the buzz outside, the atmosphere inside the convention centre was relatively subdued. Discussions ranging from advancements in nuclear instrumentation and radiation technology, to quantum physics and astrophysics, whetted the scientific appetites of the intelligentsia. Representatives from 35 countries and journalists from many more were present there, and the organizers were elated that India and Bangalore were getting the world's attention.

But their party was going to be spoiled horribly in a matter of hours. Unbeknownst to them, Le Regalia was going to be a battlefield soon. The seeds of the war had been sown two days ago, when a man identifying himself as Tilak Jaiswal had checked-in into the hotel. Wearing a neatly pressed suit and tie, he looked like a senior level manager at a company.

While walking towards his room from the reception, Tilak had made

mental notes of the security arrangements and all possible exits. Once inside, he dialled a number from his mobile and said, "Room 406." He then ordered some food using the room telephone.

In fifteen minutes, he heard a knock on his door. "Room Service," someone called out. He opened the door and eyed the visitor, a waiter carrying a food trolley. "Everything is ready, Sir," the waiter said, looking into Tilak's eyes and nodding slightly.

Tilak checked for any onlookers in the corridor outside. Satisfied that no one else was there, let his visitor in and closed the door.

The waiter pulled out a duffel bag from under the food trolley and kept it on the bed. "Check it."

Tilak unzipped the bag and went through its contents. He found a small chit in the bag. It had a list of five room numbers and a person's name against each number. He noticed that all the room numbers started with 7. *7th floor.*

"Good. You're ready to play your part, right?" Tilak asked his visitor.

The man nodded and left.

From the echoes, Prakash could sense that they were inside a large room with a high ceiling. Walking with a blindfold had made him dizzy. He wondered what Seema was feeling. Her hand felt warm and sweaty. She seemed to be completely silent, complying obediently to their captors' instructions.

Mrinal was no longer with them. After dropping the two at this place, their SUV had taken off with him. "We're taking him to a doctor," one man had said. Prakash did not resist. He knew Mrinal would be dead within an hour without treatment.

An abrupt silence in the room suggested that someone important had entered. The air in the room felt heavy with a sudden urgency. Prakash could hear people moving out and doors being closed.

A commanding voice broke the silence after a minute.

"Seema and Prakash! Two unusually stubborn reporters..." a mocking voice said. "Oh let me say it correctly... two Pulitzer Prize winning, ruthlessly stubborn reporters are standing blindfolded in front of me."

Prakash could feel some twitching in Seema's hand. It was followed by her voice.

"I know you... I know you" she mumbled and then said loudly, "I've heard your voice somewhere."

"C'mon... I'm not that popular... Am I? Your blindfolds are still not open and you've already started identifying me... No point in playing hide-

and-see then. You can remove them.”

Prakash hastily removed the cloth tied around his eyes, but squinted with pain on opening them. Before he could adjust to the light and recognize the man, he heard Seema gasp and say loudly, “Anwar Shah!”

In a few moments, the shock had passed on to Prakash. He too recognized the tall and lanky figure of the man standing in front of him. *Anwar Shah! The billionaire industrialist.* It flashed into his mind that Century News, the channel for which Seema worked, was owned by Anwar.

“So you’re behind all this... Your company has developed NB-67 and you are running these deadly clinical trials?” asked Seema, gritting her teeth with anger. “You’ve killed so many people.”

“If I was behind these killings, why do you think you’re standing alive here? Why take the pain of bringing you here? Why not kill you and dispose of your bodies?” said Anwar.

There was no reply from Seema.

He looked at Prakash and continued, “As a matter of fact I’m in some ways your saviour.”

“What?” said Prakash, frowning.

“I saved you from your pursuers in Chattarpur. I’ve arranged a doctor for your friend. He is being treated as we speak. How’s that for a saviour?”

“So those were not your men hunting us?”

“No.”

“Why did you have us kidnapped and brought here, then?” Prakash asked. *What’s going on? My mind will explode.*

“I want you to do something for me.”

Prakash and Seema looked at each other in surprise.

Anwar continued, “Don’t worry. What I am going to ask will only help you unravel this whole mystery. All the big revelations you’ve seen in the last few days form only the tip of the iceberg.”

“What is the iceberg then?” Seema interjected. She looked agitated.

“You’ll find out soon. But you’ll have to do as I say.”

“Go on,” Seema said.

“To give things a perspective, let me begin with a story. Considering that there are reputations at stake, you’ll keep it only to yourself. Else I’ll hunt you down wherever in the world and give you a painful death,” he said with fiery eyes.

After taking a long breath, he continued, “You must’ve heard about my origins. I spent my childhood in the Dharavi slums. That was thirty years ago. Today, I’m one of the top industrialists of India. My rise hasn’t been easy. India is a difficult place to run a business. Over the years, I’ve taken the help of some powerful entities. People who work behind the scenes and get your job done. People who use all possible means to remove obstacles. I’ve reached the top putting my leg into the footholds created by these people.”

“So that is how you’ve created the Centennium group...” Seema sneered.

“Behind every great fortune, there is a crime. It holds true for everybody. It holds true for me also.”

“Is Diya a part of your sins?”

“No. And you aren’t going to talk to her about all this either.”

Prakash recalled that Diya Shah was Anwar’s sister. *Seema must be having a heart attack.*

Anwar continued, “I was late to realize that by using the help from these people I was getting into a morass. I had skeletons in my closet and there was no escape from it. I was a billionaire in front of the world, but these men held me by my balls. They would often use my company’s facilities and warehouses for running their black operations. They used my men as couriers for transporting their arms.”

Prakash thought about the warehouse on Grand Trunk Road. *What was its name? M/s TurboSteels Pvt. Ltd.* “Is TurboSteels a company of your group?”

Anwar nodded. “So you’ve been there? What did you see?”

“There were cages in which humans were tortured... and maybe killed.”

“That’s true. They have many such torture houses where they purge their enemies.” he said.

“What about the facility where I was locked up in?” Seema asked.

“It used to be one of my old factories. Now they are using it to produce NB-67.”

“Holy shit! You know about everything since day one,” Seema said with disbelief.

“Not all of it. I knew they were doing a lot of illegal activities, not only limited to these drug trials. But I didn’t oppose them as long as they were operating covertly.”

“You didn’t oppose them!” Seema snapped. “They were killing people brutally goddamnit. Nitin Tomar massacred eleven children. Kunal Chaubey

beheaded three of his friends. God knows how many more people are dead. And you didn't do anything to stop them?"

"I was helpless!" Anwar shouted back.

"Ohh... So, now when you know that the whole story is about to be leaked, you're making a case to defend yourself. Isn't it?" Seema said.

"Who'll leak it? You two? I can make you guys vanish without a trace."

"So what do you want?" Prakash interjected.

"I want to make a deal." He said and waited for a few moments for his words to sink in. Then he began, "I'd turned a blind eye to whatever these men were doing, as long as they didn't threaten my empire. But they've crossed that thin line and I'm not going to sit silent this time. These inhuman drug trials for NB-67 and everything that has been done to brush it under the carpet have set tongues wagging. The cancer has started to spread. I have to limit the damage before it consumes me."

"You want us to drop the story?" Prakash asked.

"No. On the contrary, I want you to publish it. But you'll remove any reference to me."

"And why the hell would we do that?"

"Because I'm going to give you the men who are behind all this. You'll get to see who pulls all the strings."

Prakash controlled a deep urge to ask the names of these men straightaway. He wanted Anwar to answer some basic questions first.

"But why make a deal with us? Why not kill us instantly? The whole story would be dead. You'd live to fight another day," he asked. *Hope I'm not giving him wrong ideas.*

"I'll have you killed in only one case – if you refuse this deal. But being a businessman, I know you're more beneficial to me alive than dead.... You wanted to know why I'm so desperate to cut this deal. Right?"

"Right," Prakash replied.

"Because these men have bitten off more than they can chew. They have taken an international contract for some terrorist activity in Bangalore. There is a nuclear summit going on in the city as we speak. These bastards are going to carry out a deadly attack on some people at the summit in a few hours from now," Anwar said with rage.

He added, "I don't think you can carry out an operation of such proportions and then remain covert. After this attack, the government and law

enforcement authorities are going to come after these people. Some threads will link these men to me. I can't let the law come after me. I don't want to lose all I've built over the years because of some reckless and sinister designs of these people. No, I won't let these people succeed at all."

"But how can we stop them? We're not commandos. We are reporters," Prakash protested. "I think you should make an anonymous call to the police and tip them off."

"What will I tell the police? I still don't know what exactly they're planning to do. That's why I need your help in finding out their plan. If you can stop this attack, I'll hand you the heads of these men on a platter."

"Who are these men?"

"A family known as the Kushwahas. Power brokers, guns-for-hire, clan of assassins – you can call them all."

"A family?" Prakash said, puzzled. "How can a family catch hold of such a drug? Won't it take a lot of effort in research and development? Do they employ scientists?"

"It was the other way around. A man they call as 'The Doctor' approached the Kushwahas with a business deal. He used to work at a small pharmaceutical company in Europe specializing in drugs for the Central Nervous System. The company was hard-pressed for money to fund their drug development programs. They had the patent for this molecule known as NB-67, intended to be a possible drug for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The molecule had failed in the human trials, so it wasn't of any practical use presently. But the Doctor had seen the ghastly effects of NB-67 in humans. He knew exactly where it could be used. He brokered the deal to sell off the company's rights of NB-67 to the family. The company did not mind. After all they were selling a useless molecule for a few millions."

"Is this the same Doctor you were talking about?" Prakash asked Seema. She nodded.

"But how do you know about this deal?" Prakash questioned Anwar this time.

"Because I was a financier for the Kushwahas."

"You've created a monster," Seema interjected.

"It is what it is," said Anwar bluntly. He looked at Prakash and Seema for a few moments and then asked, "I have told you all I know. Do we have a deal, now?"

Prakash mulled over Anwar Shah's words. He realized they had no option. They would always have a chance to tackle Anwar later. But today, there was only one way to stay alive. By saying yes to him.

"OK, we have a deal," Prakash said, looking at Seema for agreement. Seema blinked once, meaning 'Yes'.

"Fine then. I have a private jet standing at Delhi Airport. It'll take you to Bangalore. I'll get rooms booked for you in the Le Regalia hotel where all the guests for the nuclear summit are staying. Seema, you'll be there as a correspondent from Century News. Prakash, I hope you can work it out on your own."

Prakash nodded. *There's no end to this day.*

"And one final thing. Don't ever think about double-crossing me. Trust me; you won't like to see me as your enemy," Anwar said, his face growing dark. "And obviously, your friend will never see the light of day."

BANGALORE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

It was late in the evening when Sultan came out of the airport. He had been thinking about the mission throughout his flight. The plan looked solid on paper. Tilak was already inside the hotel, ready to take care of any exigencies. The exit plan had also been chalked out properly. The only thing that he thought could possibly sabotage their mission now was the presence of Mossad agents.

The death of an Iranian scientist would definitely have rung alarm bells for the Israelis, he thought. That too when the scientist killed was of no strategic importance to Iran. From Israel's perspective, it could mean only one thing – Iran has sacrificed its own scientist to build a case against them. And it would be followed by an attack against the Israelis. If he knew the Mossad well, they wouldn't take things lying down. *Who knows, they might already have moved their assets into the hotel.* That could be a serious problem.

As he stepped into the parking lot, he felt his mood improve a bit, thanks to the cool and pleasant weather outside. Sultan saw a bearded man raising his hand for him a few meters away. He was standing beside a small hatchback.

He walked towards his escort. No conversation happened between the two. No pleasantries were exchanged. Sultan placed his bag on the rear seat and took a seat beside the driver. "You know where we need to go, don't you?"

The man nodded.

The grave silence continued as the car nosed out of the airport. Sultan opened his mouth again only when they were halfway through their journey.

“Do you have the details of all the people who checked-in into Le Regalia today?”

That was a crucial piece of information. He wanted to know if anyone from the Mossad was inside the hotel.

“Not yet,” the man replied. “One of our hackers is still trying to get into their system.”

“Tell him to make it fast. We’ll have to neutralize these agents as soon as possible.”

All the weariness in Prakash's eyes evaporated instantly when he set foot into the Gulfstream IV private jet owned by Anwar Shah. The plane was a marvel. *Strictly for the filthy rich*. He took a seat opposite to Seema in one of the plush beige-leather chairs.

He had lost almost all his tension in the admiration of the jet, till his gaze fell on Seema's moist eyes. She had just got off from a call.

"You spoke to Vidisha?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What did she say?"

"She was happy to hear my voice. But she seems to have made peace with the fact that I won't be around her most of the days. She thought I had gone out to cover one of my news stories," Seema said with a sad tone.

"Well, I could've been dead."

"She's learnt to cope with life."

"I feel guilty when I find her different from the other kids. Mohit's death has taken away her childhood, her innocence."

"I can understand. It happens with people when they realize they have grown up in life. Not many people remember that moment. Do you remember yours?"

Seema shook her head. "Do you?"

Prakash nodded. "I remember the second, the exact moment I realized I had grown up. It was a cold evening nineteen years ago, when I was returning

from my tuitions. There used to be a deserted railway level crossing on my way. Like every day, I was waiting on my bicycle for the train to cross when I heard a faint shriek. Far away, I could see a group of people drag a man towards the railway tracks. They were kicking and raining blows on him mercilessly. After a while, when the victim stopped resisting, they carried him and laid him on the tracks. I stood there motionless with shock as the train ran over the man. The killers got into a jeep parked alongside the road. I noticed that two of them were policemen. Before driving away, one of them stared at me with swagger, blowing out cigarette smoke from his mouth. He didn't care who saw him committing the crime. The look was seared into my soul. After that incident, the world no longer looked a nice place to me. I had just seen its darker side. The reason I told you this story is that I believe your husband's death has made Vidisha grow up. Don't worry; she'll understand the world better than her peers."

Seema remained silent and started looking out the window – at the unending dark sky. After a few moments, she said, "Do you think I should quit this job?"

"And do what?"

"Well, I can take up a 9 to 5 desk job. I can write. I can become a teacher," she said with a shrug. "These last few days have made me appreciate life more. I want to spend more time with my daughter."

"Yes, you can start your life again. It's a decision only you can make. Still, you're one hell of a reporter," Prakash said with a smile. "But once you become a teacher, just let me know."

"Why?"

"There could be a scoop for me. How does it sound? 'Super-woman becomes an ordinary -woman'."

Seema laughed.

Prakash was glad to see the smile on her lips. *She deserves it.*

He looked at his watch. Bangalore was still one hour away.

The banquet hall was abuzz with conversations amongst the finest minds in the world. Scientists, engineers and technologists were busy networking with each other over the dinner. However, the contingent from Israel was conspicuous by its absence.

Someone curious might have noticed that a large order for dinner that had come from Room 704. The five scientists from Israel had assembled in that room at the behest of Eli Cohen, a man from the Mossad.

Eli was a burly man who could almost frighten people with his physique alone. But, his bearded face and sharp academic eyes behind his specs gave him the look of an intellectual. He had been living in India on a non-official cover since last five years, employed as a professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy in a university at Pune. Besides spotting and recruiting spies, usually called HUMINT assets, he was also involved in organizing Israeli cultural events in India. No wonder, his case officer was the Cultural attaché in the Israeli Embassy at New Delhi.

The relationship being friendly between India and Israel, Eli had never got into troubled waters in India for his espionage activities. RAW was not an issue till now. The problem was the Quds Force of Iran, which wanted retribution from Israel for killing their nuclear scientists over the years. Recently, they had blown up the car of an Israeli embassy personnel in New Delhi. It was this backlash from Iran he had always feared, because they didn't mind killing civilians.

Yesterday's killing of yet another scientist in Iran seemed to have made matters worse. Fearing retaliation from Iran, Israeli embassies around the world had issued alerts for all of their intelligentsia travelling abroad. In India, the situation was grimmer. No less than five top nuclear scientists of Israel were participating in the nuclear summit. There was a serious threat to their lives.

Even though the Indian government had increased the security outside the hotel, Mossad didn't want to take any chance. Their plan was to move the scientists out of India by the first flight to Tel Aviv tomorrow morning. *That means they need to survive this night.*

Eli had therefore arranged a meeting with all of them in one of their rooms. He wanted to apprise the scientists of the threat to their lives and tell them to leave India the next morning. But when he looked at their faces, he saw nothing other than derision towards him. There was no trace of any fear.

Wary of what reaction he would face, he chose to stand and address the people who had taken seats on the bed and the chair. "As you all know, a nuclear scientist from Iran was supposedly killed by some unknown people yesterday."

He saw a few smiles form on their faces.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"The phrase 'unknown people' sounds interesting to me," said one of them sarcastically. "I'm glad our people had nothing to do with it this time."

The man appeared to be the youngest of the lot. Eli placed him in his early thirties.

Convincing these pricks was going to be tough, he realized. "Who killed the scientist is not that big an issue as of now Mr....?" he stopped to ask the young man his name.

"Amir Segal."

"So Mr Amir, even if one of their scientists dies of something as common as a car accident, there are a lot of people who are going to blame us. And then there are a select few of them who will want revenge. They won't sit and relax till they've killed an equal number of Israeli scientists. You, Mr Amir, are very far from home as of now. It's only a few people and I who stand between you and the assassins waiting for you. So it would be great if you can listen to what I am saying... and with some respect."

Amir nodded. He wanted to say something, but then decided against it.

Eli continued, "For your safety, our government has decided to move you out of India tomorrow morning. There is a flight to Tel Aviv at 10:30 AM. Your tickets are ready..."

"I am going nowhere," an old man interrupted. "My name is Asaf Zahavi. I'm a nuclear physicist at the Negev Nuclear Research Center. I've been waiting for this nuclear summit for so long. Do you bureaucrats realize how many of the world's top scientists are participating in this summit? One incident occurs somewhere in the world and you guys tell me to shut shop and get back like a pussy. No sir, you can count me out."

The 'bureaucrat' jibe stung Eli hard. He was also surprised at the resistance. He had thought that these men would have been scared for their lives and would leave India without much fuss. *This is becoming trickier*. He tried to use an emotional approach. "You don't understand the seriousness of the situation. The Iranians might be planning an attack on you as we speak. By refusing to fly out of India, you're playing into their hands. You are men of science, I know, but think about your families as well. They don't want you dead."

Asaf Zahavi looked at his colleagues for any rebuttal. None came. So he decided to stand down.

"It might sound like schoolboy stuff, but please be ready with your luggage tomorrow morning. You all have been put up next to each other's rooms. That is good. I would request you to be inside your rooms. If you are in any danger, call me immediately," he said, giving his visiting card to everybody.

"Good heavens! You're a professor?" Amir Segal said, looking at his card. "You teach?"

"I do a lot of things," Eli said.

Prakash was jolted awake by Seema's nudge. He realized that he had dozed off with fatigue. He looked at Seema. After waking him up, she had gone back to her seat on a divan. In front of her stood a plasma TV mounted on the aircraft wall.

"Wake up, Prakash," she said, her face beaming with excitement. "This is interesting."

He wiped the drool from his face and walked over to her side. A news channel was running on the TV, showing a news item on the recent murder of the Iranian scientist. It was a recent footage, which showed a group of youth being arrested by the Indian Police. They were shouting slogans in Arabian lingo while being dragged.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"A nuclear scientist from Iran has died in a car bombing. As usual, Israel is a suspect. So, an angry group of Iranian students studying in India were staging a protest against Israel in front of the Nuclear Science Summit venue. As you can see, they were arrested by our police."

"Why protest in front of the summit venue? Is an Israeli delegation participating?"

"Yes. Five nuclear scientists from Israel," Seema said.

"Too many things are happening in this summit. Have they increased the security at the venue?"

"Seems so. The Israeli government has already raised an alert for its

intelligentsia abroad, especially those visiting India for this summit.”

Prakash slipped into deep thought for a minute. He asked, “Can these incidents be related to the possible attack Anwar Shah was talking about?”

“We are talking about Israel-Iran relations here. And the people Anwar Shah was talking about are Indians. What’s the link?”

“Consider this: What if Iran is sponsoring an attack on the Israeli delegation on Indian soil? Maybe they are planning to use local contractors for the hit,” he said.

“An Indian group attacking Israeli citizens? That’s unheard of. Will it not spoil relations between India and Israel? In fact, our country will lose all credibility in front of the world.”

“That’s why Anwar is so scared. An operation of such a scale will create an international crisis. He can’t remain untouched from its repercussions,” Prakash said. “This is a big problem. I’ll have to make a call immediately.”

“To whom?”

“To an old friend.”

Prakash located a number from his mobile phone and dialled it on the phone mounted on the wall. *Chetan Vats*.

Chetan Vats was one of the renowned national security experts in India. He was a regular columnist in a lot of newspapers and used to be invited into a lot of talk shows for his views on politics related to the Indian subcontinent. He was ex-RAW and was once rotting in a Pakistan jail for almost nine years, when Prakash had come to his rescue.

Chetan was deployed in Pakistan when the I.K. Gujral government decided to dismantle RAW’s covert operations there in favour of ‘paratha diplomacy’ with Nawaz Sharif. Sleeper cells were destroyed and spy rings were shut down immediately, creating utter chaos for Indian spies in Pakistan. A lot of them were caught by the Pakistanis and then dumped in their jails to die. Chetan was one of them.

Prakash came to know about the plight of Indian spies in Pakistan through a friend in an NGO. He covered the news and convinced Globe News to run a campaign to push the Indian government. After six months of vociferous campaigning, the government finally took up the issue with Pakistan. Chetan was finally brought back to India through a spy-exchange initiative.

Since then, the man had been indebted to Prakash, often helping him with

insider information about national security issues. He had a lot of contacts in the Indian intelligence machinery, because of which he often knew about things, which even the police and the Army didn't.

Prakash waited for his friend to pick up the phone. Today, of all days, he needed him the most. After quite a few rings, he finally heard Chetan's voice on the other line. Prakash immediately came to the point. "Chetan *sahib*, I need some information immediately. It's extremely urgent."

"Kyun, what happened?"

"I'll explain later. Just tell me one thing. Are you aware of any security threat against the Israeli scientists who have come to Bangalore for the Nuclear Science Summit?"

Chetan thought for a moment and said, "Operational intelligence is hardly my area. Nor am I privy to intel pertaining to this summit. However, if there was any serious security threat hovering over this summit, word would have flown. As of now, I'm not aware of any such development. Normally, if the government gets a hint of any such attack, they increase the security level of the people at risk."

"Do they have a hint this time?"

"You're talking as if the threat level is critical?"

"It might be. By the way, do you see any increased activity by the Iranians in our country?"

"Wait a second! Iranians and Israelis in India? What exactly are you talking about?"

"I want to know if you see any chance of the recent Iran-Israel tussle spilling over into our country, into this nuclear summit."

"Why do you think so? Just because Iran is pissed off with the Israelis for killing one more of their nuclear scientists?" Chetan said. "You really think the Iranians will avenge themselves on Indian soil?"

"Why not? They have done so in the recent past. Haven't they? What about the magnetic car bomb attack on an Israeli diplomat's wife in New Delhi? Besides, killing a nuclear scientist gives the Iranians a better justice as compared to killing a diplomat."

"If what you contemplate turns out to be true, then we better be worried. Iranian intelligence agencies, especially the Quds Force have been active in

India historically because of warm relations between the two countries. But when they decided to carry out attacks on Israel from our soil, we began keeping them at a distance. Our government has not criticized Iran in any international forum till now only because we want their oil. But inside, things are getting hot. We want their agents out.”

“Do you think the Iranians can use our local criminals to launch an attack on the Israelis?”

“Yeah. They can. The Quds Force has used local criminals in Azerbaijan to carry out their attacks on American and Jewish targets. They can use the same modus operandi here too,” said Chetan. “But who told you that the Quds Force is planning such an attack?”

“I can’t tell you. You have your sources, I have mine. Now, answer this question: If you were an Iranian agent, who would you go to in India for such an attack?”

“It depends on how sophisticated the attack is. For small time spying and smuggling of arms and people, I can use the channels of Dawood Ibrahim and Chhota Shakeel. The Lashkar-e-Toiba guys did the same for 26/11.”

“And what if it is a very strategic operation?”

Chetan took a few moments as if thinking hard. “I can’t think of any name,” he said in a resigned way.

But his voice suggested that he was hiding something. Prakash probed further, “What about a family called Kushwahas?”

Chetan was speechless for a full ten seconds. “I can’t talk about this anymore,” he said abruptly.

“What are you hiding from me Chetan?”

“You aren’t telling me the whole story. What do you know about the Quds Force and the Kushwahas?”

“I believe that Quds Force might use the Kushwahas for an attack on Israeli scientists.”

Chetan remained quiet, letting these revelations sink in. Finally, he said, “The less I speak about this, the better it’ll be. RAW is going to wipe us out if they come to know about our little conversation. So, I’ll have to stop here. One last piece of advice – if what you said is correct, then better brace up for a national security crisis.”

“Why am I not surprised? The RAW has also used the Kushwahas in the past for its black ops. Isn’t it? That’s why you’re so tight-lipped...”

Chetan hung up before he could complete his sentence.
More dirt.

Tilak Jaiswal stood on the small balcony of his room, admiring the contrast between the serene night sky above and the frenetic rush of traffic below. A similar contrast existed between his expressionless face and his mind getting restless to do the job. A Beretta 92FS handgun was lodged in the small of his back, covered thinly by the leather jacket he was wearing. Three magazines loaded with 9mm Luger rounds were bulging up the pockets of his jacket.

His mobile phone started ringing. The call was from the same man who had supplied him his kit at the hotel. Tilak picked it up and let him speak first.

“I think they’ve got wind of the attack,” the man whispered. He sounded a bit unnerved. “None of them came down for dinner. They were huddled up in Room 704 till now. I’ve a hunch that they have got some protection from outside.”

“We’ve discussed that possibility already,” Tilak said, his eyes tracing a cyclist carrying his cycle in his hands to get out of the traffic. “If there’s anyone from Mossad, we’ll soon know.”

“There is no ‘we’ now. I’ve done my job. I’ve placed your stuff in their rooms. I’ve given you your weapons. You also have the keys for the fire exit and the kitchen exit. So, I’m going dark now.”

“OK. But be on standby. And destroy your phone and SIM card only after the mission is over.”

“Fine. And Good luck.”

Vinod and Sultan were up to something, he could sense it. Vinod was avoiding him, talking to unknown people using a phone different from his own. Had he secretly struck a deal with the Quds Force? He clasped his fingers hard, nails digging into his skin. *Why, son, why?*

Vinod could not do all this by himself. That Sultan guy had to be involved. The son-of-a-bitch had gone dark, possibly flown to Bangalore, as informed by a loyalist. This was a worrying development. He summoned his son immediately.

The door of his room opened. It was Vinod. “You wanted to talk to me, father?”

“What’s going on behind my back?” Tejeshwar growled.

“I didn’t get you,” Vinod said with a blank face.

Tejeshwar stared at Vinod for a few seconds. His son was trying to avoid eye contact. That was a sign of his complicity.

“I’m your father, Vinod. I’ve run Bastion Corp and all our operations for more than twenty-five years. Now that I’ve allowed you to take over does not mean I can’t run it again.” Tejeshwar raised his voice. “So, DON’T you dare feign ignorance before me. Why is Sultan in Bangalore?”

“I don’t know. He might’ve some meeting with a client,” Vinod replied, evading his father’s eyes again.

Tejeshwar shook his head with disgust. Vinod was lying through his

teeth. *You're compelling me, son.* He tightened his jaws and said, "Do you remember the names Durganath Kushwaha and Madhavkant Kushwaha?"

"Where is that coming from?" Vinod said in a sarcastic and almost dismissive way.

"ANSWER ME!"

Vinod stared at him with narrowed eyes. "Madhavkant was your grandfather and Durganath..."

"Was my great-grandfather," Tejeshwar said. "They were the men who started our family and our business. Do you know how we became the most feared family in the country?"

"I know. So?"

"You know? Really?"

"Well... some *zamindar* stuff you have told a few times..."

"Hear it again, son. You deserve to know. My great-grandfather Durganath used to be a rich zamindar in Bihar decades before India got independent. But, his life was not a bed of roses like yours. He went through a very tough period. On one hand, the British were arm-twisting him for indigo plantation in his lands. On the other, his own uncles and cousins were plotting against him because of an old land dispute. Those days, being weak meant being marked for death. He had to defend himself. He raised an army of fighters and stockpiled weapons..."

"So what? He still died," Vinod interjected.

Tejeshwar sighed. "He was murdered. Surprisingly, it took only one assassin, and not an army of them to kill him. They hung his body on a tree and let it rot for days. His whole family was slain. His son Madhavkant was the lone survivor, who somehow managed to escape in the dead of the night." He looked at Vinod's face for any reaction. He appeared confused.

Tejeswar continued, “Madhavkant was only eighteen then. But he had a very shrewd mind. He understood very well that the real power existed in the ‘quality’ of his protectors and not in the ‘quantity’. He travelled across India recruiting the best assassins money could get. When he returned to his lands three years later, he had a bunch of extremely deft and ruthless killers with him. Do you know what he did with the relatives who had usurped his land?”

“He killed them by...” Vinod’s voice trailed off.

“By?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“He cut off their limbs and tied their heads to poles in a cow-shed. They bled to death painfully. Some died in a day, some died in a week. He didn’t spare even women and children.”

Tejeshwar looked into the eyes of his son in the same way he looked at his foot-soldiers who had committed a grave sin and were about to vanish. Vinod, however, returned his gaze. Tejeshwar said, “You must be wondering why I am telling you this story?”

Vinod continued staring at him.

“Because I wanted you to know that a trait of ruthlessness runs in our family. One moment you are family and the next moment you’re not,” Tejeshwar

growled.

He could sense a streak of fear in Vinod's eyes.

He continued, his voice loud and commanding this time, "When I refused the deal with the Quds Force, I wanted you to accept my decision. But you didn't. You decided to circumvent the old man and play your own game behind my back. The sad part is that you're still playing the game, this time in front of me."

Tejeshwar's eyebrows curved and his lips became rounded as if a dragon was about to spit fire. "Don't bring out the ruthless animal in me, Vinod. I don't want my son to pay dearly. So, without any fucking around, you are going to tell me what you are doing at the nuclear summit."

Vinod looked scared. He said sheepishly, "I've struck the deal with the men from Quds Force. The attack on Israeli nuclear scientists has already begun in Bangalore."

Tejeshwar closed his eyes and heaved a long sigh. "Indian law enforcement authorities are going to come after us. Israel and their ally, US – both might come after us as well. Son, you have jeopardized our international business."

"No such thing is going to happen," Vinod said defiantly. "Everybody is going to blame Iran, even if they deny."

"What if any of our men are caught?"

"Don't worry. Not many are involved here."

"How many? Ten?"

"Much lesser than that," Vinod replied with a smirk.

"Are you kidding me? How exactly are our men going to accomplish this mission?"

"If everything goes as I planned, they don't need to do anything."

"How so?"

"Because we won't use men to accomplish our mission. We'll use something else – NB-67," he said with a cunning smile. "You can call it one of the most lethal weapons ever created. It makes you kill. Mercilessly. In cold blood."

Tejeshwar was aghast. He looked into his son's eyes. They were bulging out. If eyes could kill and then let out a scary laugh, they wouldn't look much different than Vinod's. He had seen those disturbing eyes somewhere.

Where?

Vinod was no longer looking at him. He was talking to himself. “You can’t even imagine how powerful a weapon we’ve got. Think of what will happen if NB-67 is injected into the bodies of soldiers in an enemy’s army. They will massacre their own people. And there’s no way you can detect it in advance just by looking at their faces. One moment you are jolly and cheerful, and the next moment you’re a wild beast. The drug reacts slowly, but decisively. The result will be that we’ll win wars without ever firing a single bullet.”

He continued, “Your empire looks very small in comparison to what I imagine it to be in the future. I have a solid and a liquid formulation of NB-67 ready. It can be added into food. It can be added into water. Soon we’ll have an aerosol formulation also. Imagine the power we’re going to wield. NB-67 can be dumped in a reservoir. It can be released in an airport, in a theatre, in a railway station. It will create havoc. Hell, it’ll bring nations to their knees.”

Tejeshwar’s gulped a mouthful of saliva. The trait of ruthlessness he had talked about was right there, in Vinod’s eyes. And he could now recall where he had seen that look – on TV, on the face of a Syrian rebel who had ripped out the heart of a Syrian soldier and dug his teeth into it.

Prakash drummed his fingers uneasily on the car window. Their car had been stuck in the traffic for the last twenty minutes. He was lost in his thoughts when his phone started ringing. It was a strange number. He picked up the call with hesitation.

“It’s Chetan. I’m using a secure line. Listen to me carefully. I’ve dug out some info after our call. Massoud Fallahi, a case officer of the Quds Force, was in India a week ago. Nobody knew why. There were a lot of dots which needed to be connected.”

“And have you connected them now?”

“Not completely. But what I have is interesting. A few months back, a couple of Quds Force agents were held in Kenya. They were planning a bomb attack against US and British targets. Similarly, in Bangkok last year, a magnetic car bomb attack planned by them was foiled. The Israeli embassy was a probable target. What’s common to both these incidents is a man. A mastermind who had visited these countries a few weeks prior to these incidents. It turns out that Massoud Fallahi was the man.”

“So my hypothesis is correct, then?”

“Iranians plotting an attack against Israelis at the nuclear summit? Yes, it’s quite probable. Just a word of caution for you – you’re dealing with some really dangerous people. So, watch your back,” Chetan said and hung up.

He told Seema about his discussion with Chetan.

“But the big question is – how are they going to carry out this attack?”

Seema asked, biting her lips in confusion. “Our government has strengthened the security outside the hotel after the news of the Iranian scientist’s death. I don’t think anyone can carry out a 26/11 Mumbai style attack now.”

“That’s true. We can safely rule out an attack from outside the hotel,” he said. After thinking for a few moments, he continued, “That leaves us with two possibilities. One, the attack will be from inside. And two, the attack will take place once the summit is over and the Israelis are out of the hotel. Maybe on their way to the airport. However, I am doubtful of the second possibility.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think our government will let them go without any security cover, especially with a threat looming over them. There’ll definitely be a convoy and a security detail. Besides, the car in which they’ll travel would also be checked for any explosive devices. The only place where our government can’t get in is into the privacy of their hotel rooms.”

“Hmmm... You might be right. But for an attack to take place now, the perps would have to be inside the hotel already,” said Seema.

“That’s scary... and surprising too. How can anybody plan this attack so fast? You know, reconnoitring the area, planning this mission, mobilizing the assassins – all needs time.”

“What’s your point?”

“I mean when did the Iranian scientist die?”

“Yesterday.”

“Exactly. In other words, close to the beginning of this summit. Isn’t it?” Prakash reasoned. “So, let’s assume that Iran is really pissed off with Israel and decides to retaliate. How many hours do they have for planning and preparing for this attack? 24 hours? Maybe a few more. The question which demands an answer now is – how can anyone strategize and carry out such a sophisticated attack in 24 hours?”

“It means the attack was planned much in advance.”

“That seems to be the only plausible explanation. But, it is then a coincidence that an Iranian scientist dies just before an attack on the Israeli ones? Or has Iran killed its own scientist to gain sympathy before retaliating?”

“That’s ridiculous. Scientists are not expendable,” Seema said.

“It leaves us with one more possibility then. And it’s scary...,” Prakash

stopped midway in his sentence.

Seema didn't say anything. She just kept looking at Prakash with questioning eyes.

Prakash continued, "That a third party has killed the Iranian scientist. Ruling out any coincidences, it's someone who knows about Iran's plans against Israel. How about the Kushwahas?"

"Why would they do that?"

"I don't know. I guess we'll soon find out who these guys are and what exactly they are trying to achieve. They're running deadly drug trials. They've a lot of thugs and professional killers on their payroll. And now, they're planning an attack of international ramifications. These bastards are quite ambitious." *Miss you Mrinal. You could've dug up something on this family. Hope you're safe.*

Seema looked a bit unsettled, probably from a sudden realization. "I've an ominous feeling about what these people are going to do. While I was a guinea pig for The Doctor, I asked him his objective behind all these inhuman trials. He refused to tell me. But now, I think I can understand his motives. Why would a family of killers want to have a deadly drug in their repertoire? ... Because they want to use it as a weapon. I can recall what the drug did to me. It made me lose control of myself totally. It was as if a murderous rage had engulfed me. Of a sort you can associate with primeval cave dwellers. It was pure horror," said Seema, shuddering with an inner fear.

"A weapon? ... Sounds creepy."

"Yes. It's deadly."

"Deadlier than the chemical warfare agents we hear about. VX, Sarin, Tabun are nerve agents which only kill. NB-67 is something which makes you kill," said Prakash. "But I still don't get your point. What's your foreboding all about?"

"That they're going to use NB-67 today."

When the meeting Eli Cohen had called was over, Daniel Levy walked to his room taking quick steps. He was one of the five Israeli scientists were attending the nuclear summit. The news of the threat to their lives had made him paranoid. Once he was inside his room (numbered 701), he ran over to his room window and slid it close, hastily drawing the curtains over it. He picked up a mineral water bottle kept on the coffee table and gulped it down. The water tasted a bit odd, but he chose to ignore it. There were far bigger issues to tackle. *Bloody Iranians. Why don't we nuke them and get over with this war?*

He was a professor and the Head of the Nuclear Physics Department at the Weizmann Institute of Science. Quite unlike other people in his profession, he had a fit and muscular body, achieved through his daily workout in the gym. He was six-feet-two and weighed over one hundred and twenty kilos. As he sunk in his body over the mattress and looked at the ceiling, a peculiar feeling of anxiety and rage began to sweep over him. Second after second, his rage kept amplifying itself every second till he was lost in a sombre dream, with eyes wide open. His mind drifted to a bloody past he thought he had left behind.

The image of a horrific bomb blast flashed before from his eyes. It was the Jerusalem of 1983. His parents had gone out for shopping, leaving him and his kid brother at home. He was having his lunch listening to a popular song on the Israeli radio, when an emergency broadcast interrupted the

program and broke the terrible news. A blast had ripped apart a crowded bus in Herzl Boulevard killing six people. His anxiety turned into fear when his parents didn't return till night fall. Accompanied by his uncle and his brother, he rushed to the blast spot. They were diverted to a local hospital by the police. All the dead bodies and the injured had been dispatched there. Daniel could not find his parents among the injured. Nor was he able to identify any of the horribly disfigured dead bodies. His parents had disappeared; never to return.

Daniel shook his head to relieve himself of the gory images. *What's happening to me?* He was not able to control the flow of thoughts in his mind. A ghastly TV footage of the aftermath of yet another blast captured his mind now. The place was Buenos Aires, Argentina. The year was 1994. A van loaded with explosives had been detonated in front of the Jewish Community Centre, killing 85 people. In the list of the deceased released by the government, he could see a familiar name – Joseph Levy, his younger brother. *Josey*. His brother had landed a job as a facilities manager in the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association building, the same place where the attack took place. Two days later, he stood at the airport looking with dazed eyes at Josey's coffin being unloaded from a flight. With throat choking with sorrow, he opened the lid of the coffin. There was no body. It was filled with stones. A beautiful chit was placed inside, saying that Joseph Levy's body had been completely annihilated in the explosion. This was all that remained.

You too, Josey?

Daniel closed his eyes. Surprisingly, they were not wet with emotions. In fact, he was not feeling nostalgic. There was no sorrow. Only fury. His blood was boiling with rage. He could feel enemies nearby. *Demons. Who know nothing but to inflict mortal wounds. Who have taken everything I ever had.*

He sat upright on his bed and looked at his coffee table. There was a sharp knife kept beside a few apples. He picked it up. *You'll have to pay!*

Sultan's eyes had not moved away from his laptop screen since the last fifteen minutes. A hacker who called himself Neo was trying to get into Le Regalia's computer network. He wondered why every hacker kept lifting names from the movie 'The Matrix'.

He rubbed his eyes to give them some respite. His hands and legs were twitching with impatience. *C'mon. Get into their system!*

His Bluetooth headset buzzed.

"I'm in!" Neo said with a jubilant voice. "It's time to play God."

"Good. Can you show me the CCTV feed from the corridor in front of rooms 701-710?" Sultan asked.

"Absolutely," Neo said with heightened excitement. "These idiots have kept remote access capability enabled in their CCTV system. And that too it is so loosely protected. That's..."

Sultan interrupted Neo. "Don't throw jargons at me, kid. Show me what I told you."

"OK, boss," Neo said dryly. "You just spoiled my orgasm."

Two screens popped up on Sultan's laptop. They showed live feeds from two CCTV cameras mounted at the two ends of the corridor. There was nobody on the screen.

"When will it begin?" Sultan muttered to himself with anxiety. Then he said to Neo, "I want two more feeds. One from the CCTV mounted in front of their control room and another from the hotel reception."

It took Neo a minute to locate the feeds and embed it beside the other screens on his laptop.

Sultan looked at all the feeds simultaneously. *Everything is quiet. No untoward activity.* But all hell was going to break loose soon. *And I'll watch when it happens.*

"Can you erase this video feed from their server when we're done?" Sultan asked.

"Oh, Yes," Neo said, in style.

Overconfident jerk.

Sultan fought an urge to call up Tilak and tell him to check out the Israeli targets. *That might spoil the plan.* The game was completely set. It was only a matter of time now. The only worry he had was about the possible presence of Mossad agents within the hotel. *Tilak will have to take care of them.*

He again focused on the laptop screen. Something odd caught his eyes. On the screen showing the CCTV footage from the reception area, he could see two known faces. He clenched his teeth and slammed his palm on the table. *How are these guys here?* He picked up his mobile immediately and dialled Tilak's number.

LE REGALIA HOTEL, BANGALORE

“Call your security in-charge,” Prakash beseeched. “Tell him it’s an emergency!”

The lady at the reception looked confused on seeing two people who had barged into the hotel.

Seema pulled out her media ID card and handed it to the lady. “We are reporters and we have information that there’s going to be an attack on the Israeli scientists who have come here for the nuclear summit. Who knows, they might be in danger already.”

The lady’s face started showing signs of panic. She called up the security officer immediately.

“He’s going to be here in a minute,” she said, placing her receiver.

“Have you been given an emergency number by the police for security related issues during the summit?” asked Prakash.

The lady nodded.

“Call them here immediately!” said Prakash restively. *Every minute is precious.* “What are the room numbers of the Israeli scientists?”

She eyed them suspiciously, and shook her head. “We’ve received a circular from the government which prevents us from disclosing the room numbers of our guests for the nuclear summit. I’m sorry; I can’t give you their room numbers till we’ve had a discussion with our security officer.”

“At least you can call them up and ask if they are safe. Can’t you?” Seema chipped in.

The lady looked away, avoiding her stare. “I need our security officer’s permission before I do anything like that. Please wait for a minute. He’s on his way.”

Both Prakash and Seema grimaced with disappointment.

Tilak stood alongside the door of the control room with his back towards the wall. Thirty seconds ago, Sultan's team had blocked all the CCTV feeds to the control room. It had helped him reach here unwatched. He felt happy that his boss had even blocked the telephone system of the hotel. *The entire communication system is now crippled.*

He raised his silenced Beretta in combat mode. His index finger was on the trigger. His orders were clear – 'Kill everyone in the control room'. He saw the door being opened and got ready to act. A man in a suit emerged from the room and yelped with fear on seeing the gun in his hand.

Tilak pumped two bullets into the man's chest. As the employee staggered and fell backwards, he placed his right foot over his punctured ribcage and bent over to check his ID. *Vishal Baruah, Head of Security. Sweet dreams.*

He now yanked the door open and barged into the control room. A wall covered with LCD screens greeted him. All the monitor screens were coloured in blue due to lack of any CCTV signal. *Thanks Sultan.* His eyes went towards the corner of the room. Two men were cowering behind a couple of office chairs like scared mice. They had probably heard the screams of their boss.

Tilak fired five rounds of slugs at them, without taking any aim. The corner of the room became instantly splattered with human flesh, followed by a thick stream of blood flooding out.

“Control room cleared!” he spoke into the Bluetooth headset mounted over his ear. “What next?”

“Quickly reach the corridor where the Israelis are staying. But don’t engage till I order,” said Sultan, who was on the other side of the call.

Eli Cohen was sitting on the bed and watching news on the TV. He was not planning to sleep today. There was too much risk. A Glock-22 and three magazines loaded with 0.40 S&W ammo kept on the bed beside him provided some consolation.

His mobile started ringing. He pounced on it.

“Code Red!” said a voice frantically. “The perpetrators are already inside. Go now!”

Eli felt the hair at his back stand up. Code Red meant the confirmation of danger. He picked up his pistol and asked, “Who told you?”

“Someone called at the emergency number of Bangalore Police two minutes ago.”

“OK. I’m on my way,” Eli said and hung up.

Are they launching an attack from inside the hotel? Bloody daredevils they are!

He cocked his pistol.

“Activity on 7th floor!” a voice came out from Sultan’s headset. It was Neo speaking.

Sultan was busy dressing himself up in tactical assault gear. The presence of Prakash and Seema in the hotel had introduced new variables into the equation. It meant only one thing. *Plan-B has to be activated.*

“I see a man on the 7th floor,” Neo said again, this time with increased urgency.

“I heard you,” said Sultan and ran over to his laptop.

There was some activity on one of the screens. *7th floor CCTV*. A broad-shouldered man was walking down the corridor where the Israeli scientists were staying. He was moving slowly, as if sleepwalking. Sultan noticed a pointed object in his hand. *Is that a knife?*

The face of the man looked vaguely familiar to him. He took out a wad of photographs from the chest harness of his combat gear. The man on the screen resembled one of the photos. *Daniel Levy*.

“He’s one of the Israelis,” he said to Neo, with a smirk.

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s doing our job.”

“Goddamnit! Tell me their room numbers!” Prakash asked loudly.

The receptionist was in panic and almost in tears. None of the phones at her reception were working. The security officer had still not reached. So, she had tried calling his number from her mobile phone. He didn’t pick up his phone. Neither did his two assistants sitting in the control room.

She finally relented. Sheepishly looking at her computer screen, she blurted out the room numbers of the scientists. “701 to 705.”

“I’m going there Seema,” Prakash said.

“Don’t be a fool, Prakash,” Seema protested. “What will you do there? Let the security forces handle this.”

“My whole life, I’ve covered crimes when they have already happened. It’s high time I prevent one,” Prakash said with determination. “And besides, I don’t think we’ve got enough time to wait for the security. I’ll have to go. You stay here. Explain the situation to the authorities and guide them.”

Seema wanted to oppose, but there seemed to be no other way. She acquiesced and said half-heartedly, “Call me immediately if there’s a problem. And don’t you lose your life!”

Prakash nodded and then turned towards the receptionist. “Give me an access card.”

Asaf Zahavi tried hard to concentrate on his book. He was reading Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco. Being an ardent reader, he usually completed a few chapters before going to sleep. But today's turn of events had upset him.

He was an old man and had only a year to retire. His prostate problems had put a full-stop on his travels long ago. It was probably the last time he was out to meet the most brilliant scientists in the world. But now the opportunity seemed wasted because of politics.

"Too many warmongers out here," he grumbled and picked up the mineral water bottle from the coffee table. He chuckled after gulping a mouthful. *Ummm... now it tastes better. Much better than the holy cow piss they had served earlier.* The previous lot of mineral water kept in his room had tasted odd. He had immediately got it replaced. He wanted plain water, not some medicinal Ayurvedic hokum.

A ring on the calling bell made him look at his watch. *11:30 PM. Who is it? Not the Mossad idiot again!*

He went towards the door and looked out through the peephole. *Daniel Levy? Must've come for a discussion.* He had known Daniel almost ten years. In his opinion, the man was one of the most brilliant nuclear physicists in Israel. He had often had umpteen rounds of discussions with him ranging from astronomy to philosophy over pegs of whisky.

He opened the door with a smile. "What brings you here my friend

tonight? Should I order some whisky?”

Daniel said nothing. His face was expressionless and eyes were wide. He slowly got inside, holding the knife he had picked from his room.

Asaf's eyes fell on the knife and his smile disappeared instantly. “What are you up to?” he asked with a frown.

Before he could say anything else, Daniel lunged at him with his knife. Asaf tried to avoid the assault by placing his hand in the line of attack. The knife pierced his palm, evoking a painful shriek from his mouth. Daniel stabbed him on his throat next time. A spout of blood burst from his sliced carotid artery. The man kept stabbing at Asaf's throat till he stopped reacting. Asaf's bladder and rectum gave way as he fell backwards on the cold floor, spilling faecal fluids all over. He was completely still in a minute.

Daniel stood unflinching, unperturbed by the growing stench in the room. He wiped the knife on the bed nonchalantly and moved out of the room, walking sluggishly in a deranged manner.

Prakash could hear his own heartbeats as the lift he was in rose towards the 7th floor. He couldn't believe what it all had come to. What had started with an intriguing case of a sniper killing a mass killer had come so far to bring nations to a clash. It was much beyond a news story now. It was a nightmare in which he and Seema were active players.

The lift opened and a frightening silence greeted him as he came out. He found himself in the middle trunk of a T-shaped structure. A corridor connecting the rooms ran on either side. He noticed a fire exit behind him and opened its door to check for exit options. It led into a damp smelling staircase. Contented that there was an exit route other than the lift, he walked towards the corridor.

There was no one in the corridor on his either side. To his left, he saw rooms arranged in the descending order.

710...709... 708...

The rooms 701 to 705 were of his interest and they were placed on the right hand side.

Before he could stride forward, he realized that the room in front of him was slightly ajar. *Room 705 is open.* Careful not to make his arrival known, he pussyfooted towards the room and gave a mild push to its door. An overpowering stench of faeces and urine made him jerk his head backwards in revulsion. *Oh my God! What's going on here?*

The next moment, the door of the room was pulled in. He saw a pistol pointed at him by a bearded man.

“On your knees,” the man barked. “Immediately!”

Prakash shook his head with disgust and knelt down. He looked at the man. The man was a giant. The fair skin and slightly brownish hair suggested a middle-eastern origin.

He tried to talk some sense into the man. “Look, whoever you are and whatever you’ve come for, you are not going to escape. Security forces will be here in a minute.”

That was a lie. He didn’t know how long the security would take to get there.

The man took a few moments absorbing what Prakash had said. “Who killed the man inside?”

“You mean a scientist is dead?” Prakash questioned back. Somehow he didn’t feel shocked. The stench had already given him a hint.

“Yes,” the man roared. “Who killed him?”

The tension in the man’s eyes made Prakash feel that he was not the killer, but a protector.

“It seems we are on the same side. I’m not the killer if you’re looking for one,” Prakash said, trying to sound as convincing as possible. “I’m here to save the Israelis. If you are here for the same thing, then you’re wasting time on me.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Prakash, a reporter with the Globe News. I know about a lot of things that are happening here,” Prakash replied with restlessness. “Look, I can answer all your questions when this is over. But as of now, I think there are people who need our help. Let’s not waste a bloody second in saving the other scientists.”

He started getting up from his position warily. The man did not oppose.

“My name is Eli. I am an Israeli intelligence agent. The bloody Iranians have...” He stopped midway in his sentence, staring along the corridor.

A muffled shriek had emanated from one of the corner-most rooms.

Both Prakash and Eli ran towards the source of the sound. A faint sound of furniture being moved came from room 702. Eli pressed his ear to its door. He gestured Prakash to stand behind him as he turned the doorknob. It spun effortlessly. Like the previous room, this one was also not locked. Pointing

his gun forward, Eli pushed the door in with his right foot. The room was completely dark.

“Whoever it is, freeze and drop your weapon!” Eli yelled, getting in swiftly.

Prakash followed him. He brushed his hand about the wall behind the door to locate the hotel card key switch. There was no card inserted in the switch. *Shit!*

He tried hard to adjust his eyes to the darkness. The dim light from the corridor was not helping matters. He took out his mobile phone and pressed a key to throw some light inside the room. The silhouette of a tall man standing at a corner of the room struck his eyes.

“That’s Daniel Levy!” said Eli loudly. A sense of relief was visible in his voice. “Are you OK Daniel?” he said again and started moving towards him.

Prakash scented danger. “No!” he yelled out, projecting his hand to stop Eli. But it was too late.

With a sharp manoeuvre of his hand, the silhouette that was Daniel, stabbed Eli in his abdomen. A wail of agony escaped Eli’s mouth. Reeling from the sudden attack, he raised his pistol to fire at the place where Daniel was standing. To his dismay, no one was standing there now. He felt a crushing blow at his left temple which toppled him over. The pistol got flung into some unknown corner of the dark room.

Daniel now hovered like a victorious gladiator over the writhing body of Eli.

Prakash stood stunned at the door watching it all happen so fast. He had no weapon in his hand. *Only a mobile phone*. He threw it like a projectile at Daniel. The phone hit the face of the monster with a loud thud and got shattered into its components.

Daniel was momentarily swayed by this sudden attack. Prakash knew this was the only chance he would get. He came into a ‘free kick’ position and gave a smashing blow at Daniel’s face with his right leg. The man collapsed backwards.

Prakash felt a sharp pain in his leg. *Have I broken a toe?* He was struggling to stand, but there was hardly a second to waste. He took Eli’s hands in his own and tugged hard at them. *God! This man is heavy*. He used all his power to pull the man’s body out of the room. From the corridor, he saw Daniel staggering and standing inside the room. Prakash closed the door

shut instantaneously. But unfortunately, it wasn't locking down automatically.

Prakash felt the door being pulled from inside the room. He kept his hand fastened to the doorknob. But his power was no match to Daniel's who was a burly man. His face winced with pain and fear, as he felt his grip slip from the doorknob. There was only one thing he could do. He let it go and kicked at the door with full force. The door caved in fiercely and thrust into Daniel's body, propelling him backwards.

Prakash looked at Eli's body. He was gasping for breath, but was still very much alive. *He won't live for long without any help.* He hammered his hands on rooms 701 and 703 and called out for help. *Where is the Goddamn security?*

Tilak was standing in combat position at the fire exit. From his position, he could tackle anyone coming through the main staircase as well as the fire exit. The two lifts were no longer a worry for him. He had blocked them by picking up a couple of heavy flowerpots from nearby and fixing them between the lift doors. He had done the same to the service elevator at the left end of the corridor.

His Bluetooth headset buzzed. It was Sultan, who sounded a bit edgy.

“The Israelis have got protection! I saw a bearded man with a gun get into one of their rooms.”

“Should I worry?” Tilak asked calmly.

“Not yet. It seems he’s been gravely injured by one of our targets.”

“Good for us.”

“But the reporter has also found his way into the corridor,” Sultan said, gritting his teeth. “The asshole reaches everywhere.”

Tilak sighed with exasperation. “He might play a spoilsport. Do you want me to finish off this mission in our usual way, without banking too much on this drug?” he asked.

“The time for that hasn’t come yet. And who knows, you might not have to intervene at all.”

“But this will take time,” Tilak said and then probed, “And why are you so hell bent on letting the drug do it all?”

“When the media will tell this story tomorrow, the whole world will

know that there are people who possess a drug like that. You know how good that will be for our future business?” said Sultan. “But, I think you should not be concerned about all that. What matters to you as of now is that security forces will soon come your way. Stop them and let Daniel Levy do his job.”

HOTEL RECEPTION, LE REGALIA

Seema looked at Asif Ansari, an Assistant Commandant at CISF, sent to lead the initial response team. To her surprise, the team comprised of only four people – Asif and his three *jawans* carrying INSAS assault rifles. Theirs was the nearest available patrol team kept for the hotel security.

Seema could see signs of nervousness in Asif's eyes as he fidgeted with his walkie-talkie. He had dispatched two of his *jawans* to the control room to find out why the hotel security officer had not arrived yet.

A brief squawk on the device made him speak restlessly into it, "What happened ladies? Found anything?"

"Three dead bodies in the control room. All shot in cold blood," replied one of his *jawans*.

Asif closed his eyes for a few seconds and said, "So Seema's fear is correct then. The attack has already begun. You have to be careful guys. The assailants might be in the vicinity. Do a recon and get back here immediately."

"Hmmm...coming back," said the voice from the walkie-talkie. "No surprises that the transmission from the CCTV cameras is blocked. All TV screens are blue."

"No more sniffing around then. I want you guys here ASAP. Over and out," he said and then mumbled to himself, "It's not going to be easy here tonight."

Looking at the anxiety in Asif's face, Seema asked, "So there are only

four of you?”

Asif nodded. “A bigger team is on its way. Might take a few minutes,” he said with a grim voice. “Till then we are on our own.”

“We might not have a few minutes,” she said.

“That’s true. Do you have any idea how many attackers are there?”

Seema shook her head. *I have no idea.*

“Can your friend give us a heads up?” asked Asif about Prakash. “But I have to admit that he is either too brave or too foolish to have gone into the action zone all alone.”

Seema felt her stomach churn with apprehension. *I shouldn’t have allowed him to go there.* But there was no point in repenting now. She dialled Prakash’s number. It was switched off. She felt her anxiety double in a second. *Hope you are OK, Prakash.*

“His phone is switched off,” she told Asif.

“You just pray he’s alive,” said Asif and then turned towards his one remaining *jawan*. “We are going to the 7th floor. Check out the lift and the staircase.”

The *jawan* ran towards the lift and pressed the down button. But he stood there unmoved, curiously eyeing the floor indicator. He was first confused, then alarmed. He turned towards Asif and said, “Both the lifts are stuck at 7th floor.”

Asif looked at Seema and then at the lady receptionist, “They have blocked the lifts, which means they are ready for us. We can’t use the main staircase in that scenario. Is there any other way which the attackers might not be aware of?”

“The service elevator,” the receptionist replied pointing towards a far end of the corridor.

One *jawan* ran in that direction, but came back in a minute. “Same thing. Blocked.”

“There is one more way. But I can’t say whether the attackers know about it or not. It’s the fire exit.”

“You sure there is no other way?”

“Hmmm.”

“So, fire exit it is! We don’t have a choice,” Asif said. His eyes strayed towards his two *jawans* who had returned from the control room reconnaissance exercise.

One of the men rushed towards him and said, “Seems to be a pretty well planned attack. They have killed everyone in the control room and shut down the CCTV feeds.”

“Did you check out the bodies?” inquired Asif. “Were they warm?”

“Yes Sir. The dead bodies were warm and the smell of gunpowder was still floating in the room. The killings must have happened only a few minutes ago.”

“I get a terrible feeling that something really bad is happening as we speak,” said Asif, looking at Seema and his *jawan* in turns.

Seema, however, was deep in her thoughts, “Something is bothering me. We ourselves came only a few minutes ago,” she mumbled.

“So?” asked Asif.

“Are we so lucky to get into the hotel exactly when the attack began? I mean, they shut down the phone system, blocked the CCTV feeds and killed everybody in the control room around the same time we were trying to alert the security officer.” Seema frowned and then started looking upwards. She turned her body in a 360-degree arc.

“What happened?” asked Asif.

Seema had found what she was looking for. “I think they have their eyes on us!” she said, pointing at a tiny CCTV camera mounted at the ceiling. “They have been seeing us all the time! And they know what’s happening everywhere.”

“You mean they’ve hacked into the hotel surveillance system? Good heavens! These are some really professional pricks!” said Asif and then barked an order at the receptionist. “Is there a way to shut down all the cameras? Even the computer network, Wi-Fi – everything?”

“Yes!” The girl turned around to face a door behind her reception desk. She swiped her card and unlocked it. Asif and Seema followed her as she entered the room. Besides a few damaged computers and broken furniture, a black coloured metallic box was placed at a corner of the room. It had a number of small, green LED lights blinking over its body.

“That’s the Ethernet switch,” the receptionist said and turned off a switch beside it. “It’s shut down now.” And then with a rush of adrenaline, she yanked out all the cables from it like a wild cat playing with its prey. “It’s

done,” she said, dropping the box on the ground.

Seema almost smiled at the aggression from the pretty girl. *Looks like Milla Jovovich from Resident Evil.*

The girl now looked at them and said, “All our cameras are IP CCTVs – directly connected to the computer network. Just now I’ve shown the terrorists the middle finger.”

“Great!” said Asif. “It’s time to go get these bastards.”

“Aren’t we going to raise an alarm for all the guests to get out of the hotel?”

“No way. This will drastically increase the number of casualties. The terrorists will simply need to keep their fingers pressed on the triggers. Easy game for them,” replied Asif.

“But this will be grossly unfair to the people who are staying here?”

“Let’s do it this way,” he said. “Once we are on the seventh floor, I’ll give you guys a signal to get floors one to six cleared. Hope the backup teams arrive in time.”

“What about floors eight and nine?”

“With the lifts blocked, people will have to pass through the zone of action. We can’t take that risk,” he said. “Don’t inform them. I’m afraid that’s the way it is.”

Seema didn’t argue. They needed to begin their mission.

The receptionist took Asif and his three jawans towards the fire exit door.

The door of Room 703 was opened by a young man. He was startled to see the massive spill of blood in front of his room.

“What the hell!” he yelled and was just about to shut his door down when he recognized Eli. He bent over his body and asked Prakash, “What happened to him? And who are you?”

There was no time to explain.

“We’ve been attacked! Please let us in first,” Prakash said. “Help me get him inside,” he added, dragging Eli’s body with his hands.

The man caught Eli’s legs to help Prakash. They lifted him up from the ground and laid him over the bed. The white sheets instantaneously turned crimson with his blood.

Prakash ran over to the door immediately and shut it down. The man kept looking at him with a panicked face.

“What’s going on? Have the threats against us turned out to be true?” he asked.

Prakash nodded. He was feeling exhausted with this cat-and-mouse game since the last few days. The pain in his knee was slowly becoming unbearable. He can’t get overwhelmed now especially in this war zone, he told himself.

He took a few deep breaths and picked up a small towel kept on the chair. He pressed it hard on Eli’s wound on his abdomen. Then he said, “Eli was attacked by one of your own colleagues.”

“What do you mean by ‘our colleague’?” the man said with disbelief. “Do you know who I am?”

“You are a nuclear scientist from Israel. Aren’t you?”

The man nodded.

“I think your attackers might have spiked your food or water with a drug named NB-67,” Prakash said, expecting a barrage of questions next. “In simple terms, it makes people extremely violent. They even attack their own friends.”

“Bloody hell!” the man yelled. “That’s why the mineral water in my room tasted weird.”

He picked up the mineral water bottle from the coffee table beside him and raised it high, allowing the light to fall over it. After yanking out the plastic label wrapped over the bottle, he looked at the naked bottle carefully, rotating its body about its axis.

“Sons-of-bitches!” he said loudly, pulling out a tiny transparent cellophane tape stuck at the place where the label was there previously. “There is a syringe hole in the bottle.”

“How much of this water did you have?” Prakash asked.

“A few gulps. That’s it,” he said, grimacing. “But I don’t feel anything strange.”

“That’s good. Just let me know when you start feeling odd.” He wondered whether he’d be able to fight another maniac.

“My name is Amir Segal, by the way. And you are?”

“Prakash. I’m a journalist.”

“And who was my colleague who stabbed Eli?”

“Daniel something. A tall and well-built guy.”

“Daniel Levy!” he said with a creased forehead. “Of all people, why he?”

The moment the CCTV feeds on his screen went blank, Sultan knew Plan-B was a 'go'. The presence of Prakash and Seema in the hotel had opened the lid over his mission even before it had started. 'Element of surprise' and 'stealth' – both were lost now. The only way to complete the mission was a blitzkrieg. *Kill the targets swiftly and fly.*

He spoke with a slightly edgy voice. "We have lost all CCTV feeds, Tilak."

"Shit! How?"

"I think they came to know about our intrusion into their systems," he said. "They can operate in the dark now. So, brace up for a backlash."

"What was the last visual you had?" Tilak asked.

"I saw them talking near the reception – the reporter Seema and four army guys."

"You should've killed the bitch when you had the chance."

"She'll be dead. Don't worry. Concentrate on the job at hand. The four guys might be coming upstairs. I think they'll use the fire exit."

"If it's only four people, I can take care of them. But I don't think I can handle additional forces. What bothers me is that all the scientists might not be dead before they come in."

Sultan remained silent for a few seconds. It was time to tell Tilak about Plan-B. He said, "I'm coming in."

"What?" Tilak sounded surprised. "How are you going to come here?"

“I’m inside La Regalia. I have always been inside as a guest.”

“And when were you going to tell me this?” asked Tilak, anger lending a sharp edge to his voice.

“Never. As long as the mission went on without any glitch, I would’ve remained in the shadows.”

“So I guess there must be a new plan now?”

“Yes. There is. Listen to me carefully.”

Sultan narrated his plan to him quickly. It was time for action now.

He wore a balaclava over his head and gripped the MP5 sub-machine gun firmly in his hand. He felt good in the combat attire. Quirkily, it smelled fantastic. It reminded him of his MARCOS days. He was made for this.

Asif and his team were crouched over the last flight of stairs leading to the seventh floor. They sat in a zigzag manner, with guns aimed forward. Asif was sitting on the third position from the front. He gestured to the first soldier to tell him what he saw. The man gestured back mentioning there was no one.

The eerie silence had begun perturbing Asif. There was absolutely no sound. *Have the terrorists finished their mission and got away?* He motioned to the first soldier to crawl ahead cautiously.

The next second, Asif's heart came to his mouth. All lights went out from the sixth and the seventh floors and the staircase. They were standing in complete darkness.

In his whole career, he had fought insurgencies in Punjab and the North-East. He had fought Naxalites in jungles. The biggest learning he had from all those missions was that you can predict the life and death of soldiers by their ability to detect an ambush. It came to him instantly that he had just failed to detect one.

The darkness gave way to a barrage of flashes. The silence was broken by ear splitting booms of guns being fired, interspersed with the painful shrieks of the men crouching ahead of him. Asif fired his gun incessantly in the direction the flashes were coming from.

"There is someone behind us!" cried the soldier sitting behind him. The man started firing his gun in the opposite direction.

Asif took out a night-vision monocular from his pocket and looked ahead through its scope. He saw two dead bodies on the stairs. *Vishal and Mohan gone!* He heard another shriek from behind and looked back. The soldier behind him had been hit on the head. He was also gone.

To ward off the person firing from behind, Asif fired a few rounds backwards and started climbing the stairs. He heard a commotion, but kept moving up. *Are people coming out of their rooms?* Through his monocular, he kept an eye out for any movement in the darkness, as he reached the seventh floor. Again, he fired a few rounds in front of and behind him. The area near the lift was deserted. He kept an ear out for stealthy movements.

All of a sudden, something dropped near him and bounced off the ground. There was a loud explosion, emitting a huge burst of light. *It's a flash grenade!* Asif's left eye, which was looking into the monocular, was temporarily blinded in the excessive light. Even his right eye was rendered useless. He dropped his monocular. *Time's up.*

A short burst of gunfire shredded his chest and thigh, throwing him on the ground. Writhing in pain, he remembered his wife and his little son for the last time. He wanted one final assault before his body gave up. Summoning up the last remains of energy in his body, he dragged himself towards the wall beside the lift to take its support. He pointed the gun forward and pressed the trigger. The whole floor shook with thunderous cracks. Asif kept swivelling his gun in an arc till he was completely out of ammo.

He could swear he heard a shriek. He prayed for his bullet to have hit the right person. His eyes were shutting down. All he could see ahead was light. White light.

“Answer me, Tilak!” Sultan roared into his headset for the third time. There was no reply. There could only be one reason. He was dead. In such situations, there was no point in being optimistic.

Sultan started climbing the stairs to the seventh floor. Barring Tilak’s death, his plan has worked out well. Plan-B was all about fighting in the dark with night-vision binoculars. They had turned off the main switches on the sixth and the seventh floors and then sandwiched the soldiers on the stairs between them. Surprisingly, one of the soldiers had a night-vision equipment with him. The solution to this problem lay in a flash grenade, which Tilak had thrown after alarming Sultan. Both Tilak and he had closed their eyes at the right moment.

He was now halfway up on the stairs. A noise behind made him turn around. Through his binoculars he saw a few people downstairs, trying to sneak out of the darkness. He fired his MP5 in their direction and scared them back like cockroaches. There was little time left now to finish the mission. He took a few more steps and reached the seventh floor.

He saw a body slumped on the ground beside the lift. He poked at it to make sure the man was dead and slowly walked ahead till he stood at the middle of the corridor. To his left, he saw another body lying on the ground. *Tilak*. He ran towards it and checked for any signs of life. There were none.

He realized that the whole mission was in his hands now. He couldn’t fail. The motto of MARCOS came into his mind. *The few, the fearless.*

He walked towards the right hand side of the corridor where the targets lay. The grayscale images he saw in his binoculars suggested an open door at the very end. Directing his MP5 forward, he marched towards the last room at the end. When he was in front of room 703, he heard a slight creak coming from the opposite end of the corridor. A woman was trying to sneak out from her room. He turned around and opened fire. It ended with a scream.

One more cockroach.

Prakash jerked his head backwards on hearing the gunfire outside. He was peering through the aperture on the door. All he could see in the darkness were sudden flashes of light.

His heart was beating furiously inside the walls of his chest. He pondered over the options he had. Unfortunately, there were none. If the assailant managed to enter their room, that would be the end of their lives. There was no escape, other than jumping to death from seven stories.

His eyes had got somewhat used to the present room. He managed to walk over to the bed on which Eli was lying. Amir was sitting on a chair beside the bed. Prakash couldn't see his face in the darkness. But he knew what expression would be there. *Absolute fear.*

With a trembling voice, Amir whispered, "How many are they?"

"Only one, I think."

"Why are the security forces not here yet?"

"I have a terrible feeling that the security forces might not come anytime soon," Prakash said. "You heard the heavy burst of gunfire a few minutes back. Didn't you? Whoever has survived that is standing outside our door."

Room 702 was slightly ajar. Sultan recalled that it was the same room in which the Mossad agent was attacked. *He and the Goddamn reporter must be hiding in one of these rooms.* But the bigger problem was dealing with a rampaging Daniel Levy. Once the big man was dead, he could focus on killing all his targets surgically.

He pressed the door with his foot and let it swivel around its axis. “Daniel Levy. Where are you?” he said, with a melodious touch to his voice. “Come out. All your enemies are dead.”

He got inside the room, absorbing the grayscale imagery in the darkness. There were no living beings inside. When he started to move out of the room, he heard a faint noise inside the bathroom. *Someone’s hiding inside.* He pressed the door, but it was locked from inside.

“Who’s inside? Open the door. There’s no point in hiding.”

There was no response.

“OK. I’m coming in,” he said and aimed his gun at the bathroom doorknob.

From the corner of his eye, he saw someone standing at the entrance of the room. Before he could react, he felt two muscular hands grab his MP5. It was Daniel, with bulging eyes full of feral rage. As the burly man snatched his gun, Sultan pressed the paddle release of the gun. The magazine slid out from beneath and fell on the ground.

But his momentary lack of attention allowed his attacker to give a

shattering head butt on his right jaw. The blow was so powerful that it smashed his night-vision binoculars completely and sent him flying into the room.

The gun was in Daniel's hands now. He aimed the gun in the direction he had thrown Sultan in and pressed the trigger. The gun did not fire. There was no magazine. He roared with fury and whacked the gun on Sultan's body.

Sultan screamed with severe pain. Daniel's blow had struck his rib cage on the left side. He could feel a few bones crack under the impact. He felt lucky that the blow hadn't land on his head. *My skull would have given in otherwise.*

He rolled over into a different place to avoid any further blows from Daniel. Slowly, he got up, holding his rib cage. The intolerable pain stole a few of his heartbeats. It was going to be a gutter fight, he realized.

You don't mess with a MARCOS. And if you do mess with one, you don't get away.

The sound from the fight going in the adjoining room was trickling into their room.

“It seems a brawl is going on inside room 702,” Amir whispered.

“I think this is the right moment to escape,” Prakash replied.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Amir said. “If he catches us, then we’ll be like a deer caught in the headlights.”

“And what will you achieve by staying here? This man will shoot you down anyways.”

“I don’t think we can cross that corridor without getting caught. We’d need a weapon, which we don’t have,”

Prakash thought Amir was correct. *We need a weapon.*

“How about this man?” he said, nudging Eli. “Eli, do you have a gun?”

Eli emitted an almost inaudible grunt. “My left leg,” he said with a feeble voice. “.38. Armed.”

Prakash felt his hand around the ankle of Eli’s left leg. There was an ankle holster. Wow. He removed the Velcro strap to get his hands on a pistol. It was the second time he was going to use it today.

The movement of furniture in the room alerted Sultan. *The maniac is going to attack with a chair or a coffee table.* He pulled out a hunting knife from his chest harness. *Just come in my arc. And you're gone.*

Daniel lunged at him with a chair. Sultan used his knife to defend himself but it got stuck in the wood. As Daniel yanked the chair back, the knife also went away with it.

Shit!

Sultan's options were receding. In the darkness, all Daniel needed was a good hit and he would be down. The only way he could level the playfield was by removing the darkness.

Flash grenade.

He took out a flash grenade from his pocket and threw it on the floor beside Daniel with full force. There was a huge noise and the room was filled with dazzling light. His eyes were closed all the time.

Prakash had just opened his door slightly to sneak out, when he saw a blinding light erupt from the adjoining room. *What the hell?* He closed the door back immediately.

"What happened?" Amir asked, standing behind him. "Did someone use a grenade?"

"Looks like a flash grenade," said Prakash. "We need to be careful while

we move.

He opened the door slightly again.

The battlefield was now levelled. In fact, it was actually in Sultan's favour. Before the blinding light petered out, he had made sure he saw Daniel's position. The giant was crouching on the corridor outside, rubbing his eyes.

Sultan tiptoed out of the room, careful not to stumble against any obstacle. He stood right in front of Daniel. The contours of the man's body were etched in his memory now. He knew what he needed to do now. *Smash my knee on the tip of his nose, driving it into his brain. Death in seconds.*

He raised his right knee and gave a crushing blow on Daniel's face. Unfortunately, Daniel lifted his face upwards just in time and Sultan's knee hit his lower jaw, breaking it.

The corridor echoed with painful shrieks from two men. Daniel slumped on the floor, while Sultan fell backwards. He touched his kneecap. A sting of unbearable pain reverberated through his body. His kneecap was dislocated.

He felt something metallic touch his scalp. It was a pistol.

“Don’t move,” Prakash said loudly.

Sultan remained silent for a few moments, trying to absorb his pain.

“Who are you?” he asked, gasping for breath.

“How does it matter?”

“You’re the reporter. Aren’t you?” He started laughing. “You’ve come too far for a story.”

“And you guys have taken your ambitions too far,” he said. Even in the darkness, Prakash could imagine a fiendish smile over the man’s lip. He poked the barrel of the pistol harder into his skull. “You and your bosses have defined new limits of being inhuman. How could you try such an evil drug on innocent human beings?”

“Every weapon has to be tested on some human being one day.”

“And what will you do with NB-67? Manufacture wars?”

“Business,” Sultan said with cockiness. “That’s what we’re after. We’re not ideological fools. We won’t manufacture wars; we’ll give fools toys to fight their wars.”

There was a noise of footsteps coming from the area near the lift.

“Forces are coming in,” Prakash said. “You’ll soon have to answer for all your heinous crimes. The Kushwahas will disappear from the face of earth.”

Sultan shuffled his head slightly, seeming unsteady.

“Don’t make the slightest of movements, or I swear to God I’ll splatter your brains on the floor,” Prakash spat, his index finger fidgeting with the

trigger.

“The Kushwahas have survived for more than a century. They’ll survive this too,” said Sultan. “But rest assured that you and the bitch are going to pay an extremely heavy price for all this.”

He started standing up.

“I’ll shoot,” roared Prakash. He never let the gun barrel leave Sultan’s scalp.

Sultan continued talking undeterred. “Find a nice little hiding place for yourself. You’ll need it. But we’ll never let you sleep in peace. We’ll weed you out and give you painful deaths.”

He was now standing.

“Stop,” warned Prakash.

He didn’t stop. He turned around like a trampled-over rattlesnake.

Prakash fired his pistol. He felt the sprinkle of a thick, warm liquid over his face. It was blood. The pistol started feeling a bit heavier to him. He let go of it.

He sat on the ground, leaning his back against the wall and then closed his eyes. The sound of footsteps was now clearly audible in the corridor. People were coming.

S. S. MARIE CARGO SHIP, SOMEWHERE IN THE INDIAN
OCEAN

ONE MONTH AFTER THE NUCLEAR SUMMIT ATTACK
O Vinod Kushwaha puked for the third time in the day. His hands were tied behind his back. So, whatever his mouth spewed out fell on his chest. He was wheezing, unable to bear the foul smell of his own filth. It was dark. Unbelievably dark. The swaying motion underneath him told him that he was inside a shipping container. For the past two days, he guessed.

Whoever had kidnapped him was hell-bent on subjecting him to the worst possible punishment. He'd had no food and no water since the last few days. He was left with no energy. Even if they let him go, he knew he wouldn't even be able to crawl.

Who are these people? He pondered over this question for the hundredth time. *The RAW? The Iranians? The Israelis?*

"Who are you?" he yelled. "Let me go. Please!"

There was no response. Only the indistinct sound of waves.

He slumped on the floor, groaning.

The sound of creaking metal filled the container. He looked up. The door was being opened. Light rushed in through a crack between the doors. He closed his eyelids in response. *Light, after so many days.*

Two men walked in. They had tied towels around their nose to ward off the sickening stench. One of them said something to the other in a language Vinod couldn't understand. He simply moaned.

The two men towed him by his arms, trying to make him stand. He

staggered, but they propped him up again. Holding him by his shoulders, they made him walk through a series of stairs. They passed an array of containers, where Vinod could hear the bleating and yelping of animals caged inside.

He looked at the two men. They were large, well built and bearded. They had to be of Middle-Eastern origin.

“Are you from Iran?” Vinod asked.

One of them grinned, showing a set of crooked teeth. But he didn’t say anything.

When they reached the doors of a red-coloured container, the man with crooked teeth tightened the grip on his shoulders ominously. The other man swivelled the doors to reveal a compartment full of cages containing dogs. They were greeted with a cacophony of barks coming from every cage.

He swallowed his saliva. Something very, very wrong was going to happen to him.

As they tried to drag him in, he resisted hard. But the man behind him shoved him with such a force that he fell flat on his face on the container floor, his nose bleeding profusely. He felt a man’s boot on his cheek. He turned over to find a man of short stature looking at him with a smirk. *Who’s he?*

The face of the man darkened. “It feels so good to see a Kushwaha grovelling on my feet.”

“What is this place?” asked Vinod with a shaky voice. “Why am I here?”

“You’re on a ship carrying purpose-bred animals for laboratory testing. We have all kinds of animals here – mice, cats, dogs, chicken. Even monkeys,” the man said with a smirk. “That answer’s one of your questions. What was your second question?”

“Why am I on a ship full of fucking animals?”

“Because the party that has engaged us wants revenge from you. It turns out that you have aggrieved them a lot.”

Vinod felt a chill run down his spine. “You’ve been hired by the Israelis, the Mossad, isn’t it? ... Look... Listen to me...”

“I’m not interested in talking to you Mr Vinod,” the man said, his face as indifferent as a butcher’s before slaying an animal. He looked at one of the bearded men and nodded slightly, gesturing him to do something.

“No. No. Listen to me for once.... Please,” Vinod cried. He tried to lift himself up, but the men made him lie down again.

“Look... I can pay you more than whatever the Israelis are giving,” he continued. Seeing no expression on the man’s face, he decided to change his tactic. “You don’t know who you’re fucking with. You’ll never get away with this!”

The man with the crooked teeth passed a small electronic device to the short man. It looked like a remote control.

Vinod shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t do this! Just hold on for a second. I can help you guys a lot. I know the Iranians who sponsored the attack on your people. I can lead you to them.”

“We already know who they are. That’s why we don’t need you.”

The man stared into Vinod’s eyes for a few moments and then said, “You people have created a wonderful weapon. It makes you feel so powerful once you wield it. But you don’t know how it feels to be on the other side of this weapon. You’ll see it for yourself today.”

“No...”

“We ‘ve administered these dogs with your drug,” the man said, pointing at the cages. “What do you call it? NB-67. Yes! If it has such a devastating effect on human beings, let’s see how it works on dogs. Good luck.”

The man pushed a button on the remote control and rushed out of the container. His henchmen had already moved out. Before Vinod could stand up, the doors of the container were closed shut from outside. He was in darkness again. This time, however, he was surrounded by angry growls and barks of enraged canines.

Amid the loud noise, his ears caught the humming sound of metal sliding against metal. His body began shuddering. He knew what was happening. The cage doors were opening.

No.

FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE NUCLEAR SUMMIT ATTACK

“That is Perumal peak, Sir!” the driver said to Prakash, waking him up from his slumber. He was pointing at a far off mountain covered with fog and forests. “You’ve been sleeping since the last two hours. You’ll miss the beauty of our Kodaikanal,” he added with a smile.

Prakash rubbed his eyes. “How far are we from our destination?”

The place where he was going was called Perumal Malai, present in this rustic hill station of South India.

“We’re just about there,” the driver said. “Will take only ten minutes.”

Prakash rolled the window of the car to let in the fresh and cool air drifting on the fog-enveloped roads. It had rained recently, Prakash noticed, as his car made its way into an alley covered with small puddles of water.

“This is the place, Sir,” the driver said, stopping the car in front of a three storied building. Its outer walls were damp and covered with mould.

Prakash felt a thin drizzle on his face as got down from the car. He raised his head towards the third floor. There was someone standing on the balcony. He smiled on recognizing the face. It was Seema.

Five minutes later, he was sitting on a cane sofa and sipping from a steaming cup of tea. The house in which Seema lived now was modest by any standards.

“Of all places, why did you choose Kodaikanal?” Prakash asked.

“It’s my mother’s birthplace,” Seema said. “Besides, it’s a quiet place.

And safe too.”

“I believe there hasn’t been any untoward activity here in the last four months.”

Seema shook her head. “I don’t think anyone other than you knows that I’ve moved to this place.”

“Where is Vidisha, by the way?”

“She has gone to school.”

“She loves this place, doesn’t she?” Prakash said, smiling. “It’s so much better than a metropolitan city.”

“Well, no doubt, it is a nice place. But, where are you hiding nowadays?”

“You’ll be surprised. I was in Banka. The same place where I got filled up with Iron.”

“What were you doing there?” Seema asked with astonishment.

“I was teaching. Helping children give up arms and get back to school. That’s the only way to let go of my tormenting memories,” Prakash said. “See, I’m happy now. I’m done with hiding. After seeing you, I’m going back to Globe News.”

“I knew it. You can’t stay away from your job too long.”

Prakash nodded. “I guess in this life God wanted me to live as a journalist only. And maybe die as a journalist.”

“Will you work on our story?” asked Seema, changing the topic.

“Not yet. Some top people in the government don’t want us to go ahead. There’s too much dirt, they say,” Prakash said with a sigh. “The Kushwahas were spread into the political class of our country like a cancer. Even the RAW has used them for black operations in Baluchistan.”

“That’s why they want us to drop the story. To save their asses.”

“And these people can be more dangerous than the Kushwahas.”

“Then why are you getting back into the groove so soon? I mean, there are people who want us dead.”

A smile formed on Prakash’s lips. He pulled out a large envelope from his bag and held it in his hand. “Things have changed for the better,” he said. “How much do you know about the Israeli version of the nuclear summit attack?”

Seema frowned. “All I know is that the Israeli government brushed up the death of Asaf Zahavi under the carpet by calling it an internal problem. They claimed that Daniel Levy had a history of depression and violent behaviour.

On that fateful night, he was very angry with the Israel government for planning to send them back from the nuclear summit. He had a heated argument with a couple of scientists, after which he killed his fellow scientist Asaf Zahavi in a fit of rage. He also tried to kill another scientist, who somehow managed to escape by locking himself up in the bathroom. They absolutely didn't attribute Daniel Levy's behaviour to the drug."

She added, "The Israelis didn't want the world to know that such a drug exists. With that clever step, they stopped NB-67 from becoming the top selling weapon in the market and being used again on them."

Prakash nodded. "And regarding the deaths in Le Regalia, well, it's still an enigma for the public. The official story is that a possible terrorist attack during the nuclear summit was foiled by Indian forces. That's it. No talk of the Iran-Israel tussle."

"Hmmm. I know that. But you've come here to tell me something else. Isn't it? What's in that envelope?" Seema asked.

"It contains a few news stories collected from here and there. Seemingly, there is no common link between them. But when you go through them carefully, you'll see a strange connect. Let me tell you one by one."

"Go on."

Prakash took out an A4 size printout from the envelope and passed it to Seema. He said, "First News – Vinod Kushwaha, the son of Tejeshwar Kushwaha and the CEO of Bastion Corp. has vanished."

Seema frowned. "Vanished? Means, he has gone underground?"

"Means he is dead."

"How are you so sure? Did Chetan tell you?"

Prakash nodded. "I don't know the details. But, it seems the RAW gave him to the Mossad as a present. Probably to salvage the relationship between the two countries."

"Good riddance."

"Second news," said Prakash, passing on another sheet to her. It contained the photograph of a man at one corner. "Do you identify this man? He's dead."

Seema immediately recognized the man in the photo. She clenched her jaws. "This is the Doctor who ran all the clinical trials for NB-67. How did this scum die?"

"He was shot dead by some unknown people. Property issues. That's

what rumours say.”

“What is your gut feeling?”

“I think he was finished off by the Kushwahas themselves,” said Prakash. “To stop any clues which link back to them. My point is supported by another piece of news.” He took out another sheet and gave it to Seema.

She read the headline from the piece of paper, “Major fire in Centennium Chemicals Faridabad plant. Good heavens!”

“Yes. The place where you’d been incarcerated is now burnt to cinders. Yet another clue gone,” said Prakash. “I wanted to ask this to you. Did Diya Shah have any hand in this? After all, she is running the whole Centennium Group now.”

“I don’t think she can do such a thing.”

“Does she know about her brother’s shady business and the people who killed him?”

“I think, as of now, she only knows that her brother was shot dead in his private yacht by two gunmen possibly hired by business rivals. Nevertheless, she suspects some foul play.”

“Who knows, she might’ve already uncovered this whole conspiracy involving Anwar Shah and hence burnt down the smoking gun,” Prakash said, frowning.

Seema shrugged. “Well, I don’t get much news here at Kodaikanal. So, I can’t agree or disagree with you. But, to tell you the truth, Diya’s a really nice human being. She would never want Centennium Group to be embroiled in such a massive controversy. Even if she did get her factory burned, she did it to prevent things from spilling over. Let’s hope NB-67 becomes history now.”

“If Tejeshwar Kushwaha is alive, we can’t say that’ll happen.”

“Where is he nowadays?”

“He has gone underground,” Prakash said. “No one knows whether he is alive or dead. Even if he is alive, I don’t think RAW or Mossad will let him go that easily.”

Seema took a deep breath and then said, “It seems someone has taken a broom in hand and decided to clean up this whole mess. Good for you when you go back.”

“But people will know about this conspiracy someday. Till then I’ll be on the hunt for new stories.”

“I’m just being curious, but was it Mrinal who helped you find all these stories?”

Prakash smiled. “Yeah. Who else?”

“How is he doing?”

“He’s doing great. Travelling around the world nowadays, spending money. His shoulder wound has made him appreciate his life more,” Prakash said and looked into Seema’s eyes. “How about you? What are you doing these days?”

“Nothing. Just spending my provident fund money,” she said with a grin. “Who knows, I might become a school teacher some day.”

She looked much happier here, Prakash was glad. His own life had also improved. He was no longer an insomniac. He felt full of energy to get back into his job. Of a badass reporter.

“Good luck, Seema,” he said, rising up. “You’ll soon see me on your TV.”

◀THE END▶

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