



**"UNPUTDOWNABLE" - NISHA DATE**

# **BOOM BABY**

**A GRIPPING INDIAN THRILLER**

**CAPTAIN SOURABH**

BLOOD MONEY  
A GRIPPING INDIAN THRILLER

**SOURABH SHARMA**

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*For all those who have a dream and work their back sides off to get it*

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## ONE

Vijay Kamra was murdered because he had information. He knew things he was not supposed to. It was exactly ten minutes before he was going to be shot.

The last Wednesday of April. Six fifty-three in the evening. Rush hour in any city, more so at the Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai. The roads were crammed with honking cars and the sidewalks with pedestrians moving about with the sole objective of getting home to their wives and husbands and kids and parents as soon as possible.

Twenty something levels above the sticky damp, Kamra was finishing last minute work in his office. The place had a low hum of the air conditioner that was set a few degrees lower to Kamra's liking. It had high ceilings, a slightly smoked shade of shiny white marble tiles and about five hundred employees. The windows ran from floor to ceiling and provided a terrific view of the skyline of Mumbai, especially in the evening at sun set.

Eight minutes before Kamra was going to be shot, the framed cityscape flirted with the shy golden sun rays.

He was sitting at his polished wooden desk. He pivoted in his chair and looked out the window and admired the city that he cursed yet really loved. Yes, it had plenty of issues. Problems of sewage, over crowdedness and homelessness. But he still loved Mumbai for what it was. It had given him everything a rational man would've hoped for. A happy childhood, an incredible woman and two well raised kids who had grown into responsible citizens.

He pivoted in his chair once again and faced the desk. Placed his fingers on its edge and tapped them to the beats of London Thumakada – he had listened to in the morning on the radio while driving to the office and had not been able to get it off his mind after that. He closed the half open lid of his laptop. At the same moment, the screen of his iPad illuminated as a result of an incoming email.

He ignored it.

Instead, he fixed his eyes on the four sheets of paper that lay scattered on his desk. He heaped them in a neat stack. Leafed their edges with his thumb and pulled out two individual papers. Held them against the sun light

and stared at them for a few beats. Examined the digits and letters on it for one final time. He placed them in his leather messenger bag and slanted it across his chest by ducking under its belt. Pushed his iPad and laptop through two tight elastic sleeves and placed them alongside the papers in his bag. Rose from the chair and broke step for the door. He knew he was violating company policy by taking those papers out of the office. *But then I've no other choice. It has to be done.* He was done for the day. Maybe done with his job after that evening. A lot was going to depend on the proceedings he had in mind for the coming hours. His breathing became erratic as he thought about it.

Six minutes before Kamra was going to be shot and back in the sticky damp, a car pulled over a few yards from Kamra's office building entrance. It was a sedan made by Maruti Suzuki. Silver in colour and newly washed. There were no stickers on its windscreen. Its doors opened, almost in tandem, and two men got out.

Both were lean and in their late twenties. One wore a white shirt and grey trousers and the other was in a casual light coloured full-sleeved shirt and dark blue denim jeans. Both had rolled up their sleeves.

The two men shuffled towards the office building and stopped on the sidewalk by a stand that was selling cutting *chai* for seven, *vada paav* for twenty and sandwiches for forty rupees according to a handwritten board that was hanging from its coaming.

The stand was at a distance close enough for a professional golfer to make a putt from the entrance of the building. It was also at a distance close enough for a decent marksman to rip a three hundred mile per hour bullet where desired with utmost precision.

Both men were recreational golfers. They played on the greens once a month and hit the driving range every weekend. Sometimes together, sometimes with other people. A generous person would've called them mediocre golfers. They scored twenty over par on a good day. But the same could not be said about their shooting abilities. They were brilliant in that regard. They could hit the bull's damn pupil and had received recommendations from people high up on the ladder. So, they knew it wouldn't be long until Vijay Kamra showed up and they executed their orders successfully without any hassle.

they waited for Kamra to step out. Just stood there, talking to each



other while taking bites from their *vada paavs*. Any of the hundred passers that brushed their shoulders would've thought of them as colleagues grabbing a bite at the end of the day or two acquaintances giving each other company during a meal.

Four minutes before Kamra was going to be shot, the men saw the lights in Kamra's office go out when he flicked the buttons on the switchboard in his office.

Kamra pulled open the door of his office. He felt the resistance from the pressure of the hinges. It sucked close as he walked forward with a dim space behind his back. He entered the lobby and trudged past the copy room, the IT section and the associates' cubicles. Some were staring at the computer screens in front of them. Others were queuing up at the coffee machine while a few had stepped out for a smoke. He knew the office never closed. For a fleeting second, he recalled his days as a fresh employee working till three in the morning.

He had moved up the corporate ladder since then. He had a large office to himself now (buried deep inside where only the Senior Vice Presidents were allowed). He entered a narrow corridor which had shinier tiles and higher ceilings. To either side were four boardrooms. Each was equipped with all kinds of world class facilities that were waiting to impress owners of multimillion dollar businesses. Kamra walked past all of them. Nodded his head and flicked his wrist in acknowledgment when he saw anyone who seemed free and familiar. Two minutes later at six o'clock, he was out of his office and staring at the shiny silver door of the elevator. He called for it.

Two minutes and thirty seconds before Kamra was going to be shot. Two minutes. One minute thirty seconds. Kamra walked into the elevator.

The relatively cool day came as a big surprise for everyone because Mumbai is supposed to be sultry and hot in the last week of April. Just a few minutes of standing outside, even without any movement, meant streams of sweat flocking the forehead and wet patches on shirts. Heat could be felt burning up through the soles in the afternoon. But the weather was unusual that day, particularly later in the evening. It was cool and breezy.

The TV news reporters who stand in front of a big atlas had not cautioned about the sudden drop in temperature. Rather conveniently, they had forgotten what they had said the previous evening when they had asked

all Mumbaikars to stay lightly dressed for the next forty-eight hours in anticipation of pre-monsoon showers. It was always forty eight hours. Heavy rains, or heat wave.

Whatever the change in weather, they always advised everyone to remain cautious for forty eight hours.

At that very instant, Kamra stepped into the elevator. He was the only one in it. A drop trickled down from his balding side tapers. Why was he feeling hot?

The two men waited for him by the *vada paav* stand.

Forty-eight seconds before Kamra was going to be shot.

Kamra worked at an audit called Shah, Patel and Associates. It was one of the most respected in Mumbai and had clients all over the world. He had been working with them for the past thirty years. So, he basically knew almost everyone in the firm. He was also familiar with the faces of those people who left the office around the same time as him. Right from the janitors to other accountants like him.

But at three minutes past seven, a man Kamra had never seen before stepped into the elevator at the tenth level.

The man was young and his height was average. He wore a dark blue two-piece suit. Probably hand stitched. He smiled nonchalantly at Kamra like he was saying- how's it going. Kamra smiled back politely.

The man then turned around and faced the elevator door with his back to Kamra. He put his hand under the lapel of his suit as if he was searching for his car keys or a packet of cigarettes.

Silence consumed the elevator. No music, no voice of a lady over the speaker.

Three seconds later, the air inside the elevator was shredded to bits when two muzzled screams emanated from a single barrelled gun. One after the other. They pierced the elevator air as they speared inside Kamra's body. He fell to the ground in a jiffy, in a pool of red.

His clothes became clogged. He was dead even before he had realized a thing. Some blood had splattered across on the frosted reflections on the elevator walls. Two bullets were all it had taken. One would've sufficed, but nothing could be left to chance. There was no room for any error. Not when

the stakes were so high.

The man bent in his knees and picked up two bullet shells and carefully put them in the side pocket of his trousers. He also put the gun back in a chest holster that was concealed by the lapel. He stepped out three levels later, on the seventh.

Kamra's body was still warm.

The man then slid into the fire escape and went out of the building through the front door. He crossed the road and hung a slight right. He pushed some buttons on his phone and inside twenty seconds, a car stopped in front of him. He swung open the back door and sat inside. Looked out through the window and saw the two men who were standing by the hot dog stand across the road. They were talking to each other; waiting for the person he had just shot dead. They looked at their watches as they ate the last chunks of their food. Their restlessness was palpable even from a distance.

They got smaller and smaller and eventually merged into the crowd as the car rolled forward and outside the compound of the Bandra Kurla Complex.

## TWO

Eight days later and one city across, Arjun Parekh was convalescing in a local hospital in Pune. He was supposed to be discharged in the morning but a delayed test result had held him back in the hospital. So, he had waited, all by himself, all through the afternoon and a better part of the evening. He had watched television, browsed through newspapers and skimmed through shiny paged magazines that he had already read several times before.

The newspapers, especially the State Times, spoke in excruciating detail about Vijay Kamra's murder. They had dubbed it as the 'Mumbai Mid-Day Murder'. A local editor had put it out as the headline on the day following the murder and other editors had picked it up from there. Arjun wondered why it was called mid-day when it had happened in the evening. *Maybe because of the alliteration.*

The coverage of the murder had started to go stale and people had begun to show little interest post Wednesday's evening edition. But then, the investigation had gathered momentum on Friday when a police officer was quoted saying, 'exceptional new evidence has surfaced which has sped up the investigation'. So, the newspapers had run the Mumbai Mid-Day Murder story once again. The police were looking at a person named Manoj Joshi. Very few other newsworthy things seemed to happen in the state of Maharashtra and even India according to some newspapers. Even the celebrity gossip had taken a back seat.

He put the magazine aside on his pillow after reading an entire story on perks of eating light at night. He sat up on the bed. Its relatively high and even the toes of his six foot body dangled above the tiled floor.

He glanced to his left at the round clock on the wall. It was six fifty PM. His shoulders slugged down. He put one hand on the stack of magazines beside him and wondered whether he would be discharged that evening or have to wait till the morning of the next day.

Just then, there were two raps on the door.

He turned from his waist and looked to his left to see it open slowly. It was well oiled and did not creak.

A young lady emerged. It was Kanaka Arora, a medical intern who had been assigned to him. She had worn a white doctor's jacket over a T-Shirt and jeans. Kanaka had been with him right from day one and nearly a month later they had become decent friends. 'May I come in?' she said, standing in the door frame with her tiny head peeping through the small gap.

Almost instinctively Arjun removed his foot that he had put in his mouth to bite off a toe nail. 'Please', he said to Kanaka but she had already stepped inside and maybe even seen what he was doing.

Maybe the second worst action to be walked in on, Arjun thought. To avoid further embarrassment, he changed the topic altogether. 'Final dose of injections coming up?' he said even though he knew the answer.

'No more injections for you,' Kanaka said as she made her way inside the room. Her voice was sugary. Arjun liked it.

She was carrying a small medical kit which slanted in front of her with its narrow leather strap right between her bosoms. She didn't have any sort of a paper in her hand though and her kit was too small to carry any. He sighed.

It was almost as if Kanaka had a clairvoyant call and heard his low sigh. She said while walking up to the side table where all of Arjun's medicines were kept, 'Dr. Sharma is personally coming here in a few minutes to discharge you. She promised she won't keep you long.' Then she paused a spell from whatever she was doing and her green eyes looked up, right at Arjun, and then turned back to the table.

Arjun had leaned forward on the bed. He watched Kanaka work at the side table as she set aside the medicines which he was supposed to take home.

'You seem a bit off today,' he said.

Her green gaze rose again. It remained fixed on Arjun this time. Her hands continued to work away mechanically. They disposed a foam cup into a foldable dustbin bag, wiped the surface of the desk and kept two small fluorescent yellow bottles of pills on it.

'Why do you say so?' she said.

'Your general demeanour. You're not your energetic self,' Arjun said as he stretched his hands. 'I mean, by now, you would've said something

about being happy or sad about my discharge or how perfect the weather is or something about your journey on your way over here. You're really silent. You were chirpier than this on my first day here and you didn't even know me back then.'

Kanaka remained silent for a spell. Her eyes wandered. She said, 'It's about a friend, a really close friend.'

Then her hands stopped working. She took a step forward. It was noiseless and measured, like she was approaching the edge of a cliff. A flux took over her face. Everything happened suddenly, within a beat. She said, 'She has a problem. I'm worried about her. She's in deep trouble. I'm utterly shocked because I definitely was not expecting it.'

There was despair in her voice. It was barely audible and its pace had increased.

She went silent once again and gave the impression of being deep in thought. Her eyes, for the first time, seemed lifeless.

Arjun might have held his tongue otherwise but something about Kanaka's behaviour made him speak out. 'Wait hold on, what happened?' he said, turning fully to his left to face Kanaka.

He did not get anything from her. She remained quiet. Arjun spoke again. 'What is your friend's name?'

Kanaka looked up and said after a spell, 'Mugdha. Her name is Mugdha Joshi.'

At that exact moment, the door opened and a fresh daisy perfume swirled inside the room. It grew stronger and sweeter as a slender woman of about forty years of age walked in. Arjun recognized her straightaway and a smile hung on his face. 'Good evening Dr. Sharma. I've been waiting for this moment,' he said.

Like always, Dr. Sharma was dressed casually in a maroon full sleeved V-neck shirt and a pair of plain black jeans. She also wore a doctor's coat which was long enough to finish midway on her thighs. Her name, 'Dr. Anjali Sharma', was stitched across her heart, over her white coat.

She was holding a couple of loose sheets of paper by making a pincer of her fingers. Two free ends of a stethoscope dangled freely around her neck. Her face broke into a genial smile the moment she saw Arjun. 'You

know why I'm here, Arjun,' she said.

Arjun sat up fully on the bed. He shook hands with the doctor. Kanaka stood where she had been standing. Her face had turned ashen and her eyes were not sparkling as they usually did.

*Something is wrong, terribly wrong.*

'Here's your final test report,' Dr. Sharma said and held out a paper mid-air.

Arjun moved his focus from Kanaka's face and eyed the doctor. He could still see Kanaka at the corner of his field of vision.

Dr. Sharma went on. 'All the reports are fine except for two things. First, there's minor infection in your wound in the leg. But that can be dealt with by a medication and we won't hold you in here any longer just for that. A very mild dose of medicine would take care of it. The second is your leg itself. The fracture is taken care for now but you need to be careful and not put too much pressure on it. So, use a cane when you walk.' Dr. Sharma paused and smiled. She said, 'And finally! Here you go, your discharge document,' she said, 'Sign it and you're free. I know you have been waiting for this for a long time.'

The smile on Dr. Sharma's face turned into half a grin which revealed her perfectly aligned teeth even more prominently.

'You're happy to see my back, aren't you?' Arjun said.

Dr. Sharma held out the discharge document. 'I know you're happy to see mine too. Perhaps a lot more than I am,' she said, 'I know how much you actors hate being away from the camera for too long.'

Arjun decided to let that comment on his profession pass. He took the papers from the doctor and glanced at them, not for too long though. The test report had names which he could not pronounce and numbers that did not make much sense to him. He leafed it below the discharge document which contained a large box at the bottom of the page for him to sign. He took a pen from the doctor and scribbled his signature.

'We'll follow up on your progress in the coming days. You'll need to come back here for some more tests to check whether the infection has been fully wiped out. But that will only be after your dose of Bisolvon is over. I've written down the time and date of your test on the back of your report. I

suggest you admit yourself for a day so that your insurance can cover the expenses.'

'I'm grateful, Dr. Sharma', Arjun said, extending his arm for another handshake.

Dr. Sharma shook his hand and flashed a smile at Arjun, nodded in Kanaka's direction and walked out. She left the door open behind her.

Arjun eyed Kanaka and then shuffled up to the foot of the bed. Bent down and picked up a light blue duffle bag from under it. He had already packed in most of his stuff in the morning but his toothbrush was still in the bathroom and so were his shaving utilities from what he could remember.

'Give me a minute,' he said to Kanaka and walked into the bathroom. He closed the door and in a blink, she saw a crack of yellow light around the door frame. A minute later, he came out with a small opaque plastic bag in his hand.

'All ready,' he said and then paused. 'Can we continue our conversation outside? I'm dying to breathe some oxygen.'

He noticed Kanaka's head bob subtly and then broke step for the door. She followed him closely.



### THREE

Arjun strode outside the room with the gait of a golfer who was approaching a potential eagle putt. Kanaka straggled behind him. Her gusto was more like that of someone who had made a double bogey, on consecutive holes.

The hospital was not one of those big commercial skyscrapers that are present in literally every third block. It wasn't a tall glass building that would show up prominently on the GPS and help people use it as a reference point. Instead it was a small structure, privately owned and three storeyed with each floor having the capacity to house five patients. Since the top floor had two operation halls, the hospital could only house ten patients.

It was two years old and had been started by an ex-Army guy. The veteran's name was Vasu Sharma, and Dr. Anjali Sharma was his older daughter. His younger daughter worked at a law firm in Pune. The father-daughter duo had started the hospital with the intention of providing the best personalised medical care and services in the whole of Pune. They had plans of expanding the hospital and had even found funders who were ready to support them. They had named it 'The Sharma Foundation'. It specialized in orthopaedics and was tucked in a cosy corner of Baner.

Arjun had been admitted for almost three weeks after he found himself in an accident while shooting for a feature film. In those three weeks, he had developed a warm bond with the hospital's staff. They used to play cards in the evening and talk about sports in the morning. All of them had lined up at the exit to hug and wish Arjun well as he left. He felt slightly ambivalent as he said goodbye to everyone. They promised to meet soon.

Ten minutes later, Arjun was breathing fresh air under the deep purple sky, just beyond the four shallow vestibule steps. The air was warm, almost the same as the evening when Vijay Kamra had been murdered.

Arjun looked skywards but could not spot the moon amongst the fast-moving clouds. He could see sparkling stars though, studded in the deep purple of the night.

Kanaka joined him outside and stood by his right elbow. He turned to face her. She had brought a wooden cane for him along with her. It was dark

brown and had a rubber handle and base.

The fluorescent yellow ankle length skirt that she wore was looking fabulous on her. It fluttered in the breeze, making a gentle rapping sound every now and then. On top, she had put on a white camisole over which she had pulled a laced full-sleeved black sweater that was buttoned up half way in front. Her hair was tied in a bun, a sight Arjun was not used to. He liked it better when it flowed freely over her shoulder. She also had a small purse in her other hand.

Arjun was wearing a dark round neck T-shirt and denim jeans. His stubble was dark and heavy for someone who had shaved the previous evening. His eyes were sore from little sleep and there was some stiffness in his back. He felt his stomach churn.

‘Right, so tell me about your friend. Her name is Mugdha, right?’ he said and patted the right pocket of his jeans. He first felt his mobile-phone and then a packet of cigarettes under it.

There was a stone bench a few steps from the hospital’s vestibule. Arjun trudged towards it. Kanaka walked along with him. She sat on the bench, right on the edge of its seat. Crossed legged and palms on knees. Arjun preferred to stand. He had been inactive for many days and longed for any kind of exertion. Arjun watched Kanaka patiently as he let her get comfortable.

She said a while later, ‘Yes, Mugdha. We’ve been friends for quite some time now. Seven years if my memory serves me right.’ ‘Yes, go on,’ Arjun said while nodding his head.

‘She was two years junior to me in college but we did a semester abroad together, at a university near a place called Hampshire in England,’ Kanaka said. ‘It was summer when we had gone there and the whole country looked beautiful. Not as rainy as we imagine it to be here, though there were some evenings when it really hammered down. But it was pleasant apart from that so we had a whale of a time. The temperature was not that high either. It was during that semester abroad that I really got to know Mugdha.’

She took a long pause and then said, ‘And that was also where she met her husband, Manoj Joshi.’

Arjun’s mind suddenly became alert. *Manoj Joshi. What the hell. That’s the guy the police are looking at for the murder in Mumbai. Is he the*

*same guy?*

‘It is Manoj who is in trouble,’ Kanaka said.

‘Is he the same man in the newspapers?’

Kanaka nodded. ‘But don’t judge him,’ she said.

Arjun found it hard but stayed silent.

Kanaka waited for a spell and said, ‘During the semester abroad, we stayed in a row house a few blocks from the university campus and Manoj was our neighbour. He was twenty-five back then and Mugdha was twenty-one. He had a master’s degree in finance and worked at a local branch of a multinational bank. He was a citizen of the UK.’

Kanaka tucked a free strand of her glorious curly hair behind her right ear.

‘They started off slowly. Remained just friends for a couple of months even though it was evident that they liked each other. After that initial phase of lethargy, they hit the ground running. They did it the traditional way. Like, you know, going out every odd weekend. On some occasions dragged me out with them too. Their dates were simple. Mostly a movie followed by dinner. Their dinners were simple too. They only consisted of a cloth spread on a lawn along with a candle and some wine and beef. That was all they needed.

And it was England, so there was lots of snogging in the public. Sometimes Manoj also surprised us at our college with a breakfast of pancakes which he had made. He also brewed wonderful coffee for an English person. He really loved that kind of stuff and Mugdha too was a sucker for romance. Soon, they were a runaway hit.’

Arjun took another drag. He figured Kanaka needed some time to reach a comfort level before she told him anything of substance about what was worrying her. He remembered one of his co-actor’s dialogues from a pilot that he had shot which had never got aired as it goes with most pilots. *Let them speak as much as they want as long as a man ain’t dying.*

No man was dying. Neither there on the sidewalk nor in the hospital that he had just walked out of.

At least, not just yet.

## FOUR

Arjun was enjoying the smoke in the fresh air, as ironic as he felt that was. It felt far better under a glowing sky than in the stale and stagnant stench of a hospital bathroom. He was also fond of Kanaka's company. He cared for her and was not sure when he would see her next. He held his tongue and let Kanaka speak. No interruptions. Listen more, his grandma had always told him.

That was his first mistake of the evening.

Kanaka talked about how Manoj had come to India for a short trip, several weeks after she and Mugdha had returned from the semester abroad. He had stayed with Mugdha and the two of them seriously thought about how they could take the relationship forward. At the end of Manoj's week long stay, they decided that one of them would move to make the relationship work. Manoj insisted, back at that time that he would try to relocate to India first because that would be more practical since his bank had branches in many of the big cities here. Plus, even back then, getting a work visa in the UK was not the easiest thing.

'After returning to the UK, Manoj's job hunt began,' Kanaka said. 'He pulled all sorts of strings where he worked but did not get a breakthrough. He also spoke with many of his clients here in India. They included other banks and some software companies. The job hunt went on and we began to lose hope as the weeks slipped into months.

But just then finally, nearly a full year later Manoj got a call. He had been offered a position in a bank by one of his clients. The pay was not great and far less than what he got in the UK but he did not care. Six weeks and several interviews later he was on a British Airways flight from Heathrow to Mumbai.'

Arjun paced in the area in front of the bench while listening to what Kanaka had to say. A few strides there and a few strides here, like he was patrolling. He limped most of the time because he was not using the cane. He listened patiently.

But then Kanaka stopped talking because her mobile phone started ringing.

She dug in her purse for a spell and took out her mobile phone.

The caller ID flashed Mugdha's name.

The phone's ringtone was some song. Arjun didn't know its name but he reckoned that he must have heard it at some point because it seemed way too familiar. The tune that Arjun had started to fancy was replaced by silence as Kanaka listened with a blank face.

A minute passed. Kanaka got off the call. She tucked her mobile phone back in her purse and looked up at Arjun who was now in front of her. His tapering shadow covered half of her face. Arjun noticed a subtle but sudden change in Kanaka's poise. Her face had turned a tint whiter. Her hands had become fidgety. She was breathing through her mouth.

From the time Arjun had known Kanaka, nothing had fazed her. Her eyes had permanent ownership of equanimity. She could handle the tantrums of her patients well, she never swore and she wasn't apprehensive about patients suffering from any sort of a mental discomfort because of a physical injury. In fact, she was more than willing to help them through their troubles. She used to strike normal conversations that worked just like Xanax but for its side effects and resistance build up. The same went for crucial surgical procedures. There were not many life or death operations at the Sharma Foundation but if there were any, she was the first to be picked by all the doctors. She was the go to person for everyone. She always had a smile on her face and she took it upon herself to make others feel warm and comfortable even if it meant experiencing some level of distress herself.

Arjun was convinced that something was wrong. 'What's the matter?' he said.

Kanaka bobbed her head from side to side. Her voice barely reached Arjun when she said, 'Nothing.'

But then her eyes gave her away.

For a flash, they settled into an unsure stare over his shoulders, somewhere behind him towards a narrow road that led to a bus stop. He took a step forward and sat on the stone bench, right beside her. He felt the cold stone against his thighs. He took her hand from her knee. It was cold and trembling a little. He massaged her long fingers with his and gently rubbed his thumb against the back of her palm.

She looked up at Arjun, as slowly as the clouds took to uncover the

moon. Under its silver light she saw that he had raised his eyebrows as if he was asking are you sure? Arjun held Kanaka's hand firmer. She closed her eyes for a flash. Then took a deep breath, this time through her nose and said, 'I've to go. I need to meet Mugdha. It is really urgent.'

But she remained seated. The clouds covered the moon once again.

Arjun said, 'Hey, talk to me here. What's the matter?'

There was a long silence. Kanaka seemed shocked, not upset. She said, while staring somewhere in the distance, 'Mugdha's husband was only a suspect so far. You read about it right? But they just arrested him and he has confessed to killing the man in Mumbai.'

## FIVE

Arjun's eyes widened and he stared at Kanaka, unsure what to say. She was not crying, was far from it, nowhere near. She was just immensely shocked. Her eyes were a narrow line and there was a small furrow above her left eyebrow. He could see her pink lips move a bit as if she was saying something to herself over and over again.

'I need to go. I need to meet Mugdha,' she said for the second time. This time she rose from the bench to leave.

Arjun noticed Kanaka's equanimity return as she rose from the bench. It wasn't there to its fullest yet, but it had improved and was surely better than what it had been some beats back.

'I'm coming with you,' Arjun said as he got up too. He shuffled as quickly as he could with the cane. He hopped a few steps to match Kanaka who was walking at a brisk pace.

'You don't even know Mugdha.' Kanaka's reply was quick and it didn't slow down her pace either. She kept striding ahead.

He matched her in riposte and step. 'I know I don't,' he said, 'But I've spent a long enough time with you to start caring about you. Something has upset you and I want to be with you at this point.'

Kanaka did not answer. She took shorter steps though.

They walked together and went around the bench and past the vestibule of the building. They did not say a word as they marched along the patio and hung a left. They paced a few yards to enter an open space that was contained by a makeshift fence in the form of coiled metal wires in the distance. It was knee high, not more.

The open space was concretized and had been converted into a parking lot. It held about seven to eight cars at that time but could have probably held a maximum of about twenty without much congestion. Maybe a few more.

Some cars were parked by the walls of the hospital under a roof. The others were in the open and spread out in no pattern. Kanaka's car was somewhere at the far end of the lot, near the coiled fence.

They marched across the lot and stopped near a grey hatchback that had Fiat's insignia on its hood. The car was white and old. There were some scratches on its surface, like a kid had taken a key and scraped the paint while walking. The car might have been a second-hand version but it was good enough and comfortable enough for two people.

The air in the car's cabin was stale. It had the sort of smell that cars develop when left unused for some days. It was not bad as such but the small cylindrical bottle of perfume on the dash was certainly not doing its job. Arjun pulled the seat belt and heard another click when he strapped it across. Soon, they rumbled along and got on the road

'Mugdha told me that she was with Manoj when the murder happened. She told me about it,' Kanaka said, looking up ahead. 'And I joined them at their house in the evening soon after that. I saw him. He was in the kitchen, making food for us, when I reached their place. He was calm and composed and did not show any sign of discomfort. I've known him for a long time now. He couldn't have done it. They've got the wrong man, Arjun. I think Manoj is innocent. I don't understand why he confessed.'

## SIX

The car wheeled forward. Arjun's head was partly outside the window and he could hear the hiss of the tyres on the road as they rolled ahead. He thought about what Kanaka had just told him.

'What time did you reach their house?' he said, looking outside.

Kanaka's response was quick. There was intent in her voice. 'Ten thirty at night. We were celebrating.'

'What?'

'Mugdha and Manoj's pregnancy.'

'Why so late?'

'Manoj was travelling to Mumbai.'

Arjun had read most of the articles on the murder that had been printed in the State Times. Their reporting had been impressive and a lot of the pieces in it consisted of quotes of the officials involved in the



investigation. Everyone wanted to be in the morning newspapers, so the police officers had not shied from speaking to the media. Though, there was one instance when the identity of an officer was kept secret.

Arjun remembered reading an article that had quoted a forensics expert estimating the time of death to be anywhere between six thirty and seven thirty. *Manoj could've easily made it back to Pune by ten thirty if he did indeed commit the murder.* 'How do you know if Manoj was home before that?'

'Mugdha told me he came at nine. I believe her. And the police also have records of him being at the Pune Mumbai expressway at eight. He couldn't have made it out of the city from BKC so fast if the murder was committed at the estimated time.'

\*

They drove in silence. They went around the Pashan Circle and past the

Defence colonies and entered Bavdhan. Kanaka pulled over outside a cafe called Jerry's. It was a café and looked cosy. They walked on the sidewalk and up the steps. Arjun used his cane so he could walk more comfortably.

The lights inside were dim and yellow. Or probably green. Arjun could not say for sure because he was colour blind. A song was playing very softly in the background and the air swirled with the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans.

It was medium in size and nearly a square in shape. There was an open counter cum kitchen to their left side. Croissants, cupcakes with bright coloured candy on top and pastries were on display at the counter. Round tables of different sizes were evenly spread out in front of it. There were two sofa sets with fluffy red pillows to their right of which one was occupied. Jerry's was doing well for a Thursday evening. Kanaka scanned the entire room starting from the counter on the left. She stood still and only her eyes moved. They stopped in the middle of the room, on a table against the wall.

'That is Mugdha,' Kanaka said in a mused voice, jerking her head towards the woman sitting at the table a few yards in front.

Arjun looked in that direction. He saw a woman checking her phone. She was probably in her early thirties. Her height and weight were average.

Maybe five feet six and seventy kilograms. Her lashes were long and elegant as they sat above her large dark eyes. She was wearing a loose dark dress which fully covered her legs and formed an oval around her neck.

Kanaka then walked up to Mugdha. It was an urgent walk. Small but rapid steps, almost as fast as a jog on a cold winter morning. Mugdha saw Kanaka and she got up by holding the edge of the table and pushing her chair behind. Mugdha smiled. It was just a slight curl of the lips, not the sort of smile that reaches the eyes.

The two women opened their arms as wide as they could even when they were a good six strides away from each other. Both were as ready as a person could get to hug another. Eventually, their dark hair merged into each other. The hug lingered for a few blinks.

Arjun stood awkwardly. He watched from a distance for a spell and then broke into step towards them only after the rather long embrace was over. Kanaka introduced Arjun to Mugdha in a manner that hinted to him that he had been a topic of their conversation some time before. 'Hello,' he said to Mugdha who smiled politely. They shook hands and the three of them sat at the round table.

The table was too low for Arjun's liking. He adjusted his chair and moved it around to make room so that he could stretch his legs. He wanted to go out

for a smoke but decided against it because he saw a dark-hairedwaitress walk up to their table to take the order.

That was his second mistake of the evening.

## SEVEN

The food was good but Arjun was not sure if it was his hunger talking. He got to know the secret of Kanaka's impeccable body when she only ordered a chicken salad and green tea. Arjun was craving for food that was not made in a hospital. He had a glass of watermelon juice and one portion of pesto pasta. Mugdha had one club sandwich.

The two women spoke between taking bites and at times even while taking bites. Arjun did not say anything, only listened.

Mugdha narrated the events of the past few days to Kanaka. She started off by talking about the police coming with a search warrant to their house eight days back. The next day, they also searched Manoj's office and car. Then, Mugdha told them that Manoj was asked to come to the stop for questioning a couple of days later. The interrogation had lasted for more than three hours. Then there was no activity for three days. Both, Manoj and Mugdha, believed that the worst was behind them. But the very next day, at seven thirty in the morning, the police had come to their house to conduct another search. Arjun guessed that was when the police had found 'exceptional new evidence'. Mugdha told them that the police had also brought two German Shepherds with them. While leaving the house that day, they had seized Manoj's passport and asked him not to leave the city until further notice.

Then Mugdha told them about the events of the eighth day. Arjun had seen the tears that had formed behind her large round eyes when they had sat down. She seemed to do alright in the beginning, but they rolled down her cheeks when she got to the part of the actual arrest. Her voice cracked a bit too.

She was leaning forward in her chair with her elbows and wrists resting on the table. Kanaka was holding her hands. Even she had turned slightly white and looked sort of like what she had when she had told Arjun that she was worried about Mugdha.

'They arrested him today in the evening at five thirty,' Mugdha said.

Arjun tried to remember what he was doing then.

Mugdha then paused and took a deep breath. Said, 'Three cops came to our house. They were rude. Manoj was sleeping, so one cop woke him up. Another said something very loudly to him while the third handcuffed him. It all happened simultaneously. I watched them take...' Her voice trailed off.

She buried her face in her palms. Kanaka moved closer to Mugdha and gently stroked her back.

She later told them that forensic evidence had been found against Manoj which had propelled the police to take him into custody. First, gun powder from the same type of gun that was used to kill Vijay Kamra was found on Manoj's clothes. Later, the gun was found and had Manoj's fingertips. Additionally, five eyewitness accounts had placed Manoj near the crime scene. Just as the police were making a full case against Manoj, he had confessed to the crime and that was the game, set and match.

The arrest had taken only eight days, just like it happens in television shows.

Arjun reckoned Mugdha was hesitant to give the details because he was present. But he didn't care much about that because he was there for Kanaka if she needed any kind of assistance. Still, he visited the restroom once and walked out for a smoke, just in case Mugdha wanted some alone time with her friend.

The dinner lasted for approximately an hour. It could have lasted longer but Mugdha had an appointment with her lawyer at nine-thirty so she got up to leave. Kanaka insisted to come along but Mugdha was adamant and kept saying that was not necessary.

'I'll come to your place later, alright?' Kanaka said, getting up from her chair.

'Okay. I'll call you once I'm back home,' Mugdha said. 'And I appreciate you coming here. I really do.'

Kanaka hugged Mugdha and whispered something in her ear to which she nodded. Arjun got up and extended a hand which Mugdha shook tentatively. Her hand was as cold as a can of beer.

After seating himself on the chair, Arjun noticed a man and a woman, sitting near the door, exit Jerry's right after Mugdha.

But Arjun didn't find anything suspicious about that. A few blinks later a group of friends followed suit. It was evening at a café so Arjun's suspicions were not piqued.

That was his third mistake of the evening, maybe the costliest of them all.

## EIGHT

The evening had cooled down by the time Mugdha had stepped out. She waddled along the sidewalk casually. Her car was parked across the road under the shadow of an old oak tree, a couple of hundred metres from Jerry's. She crossed the road after looking out on either side even though no cars were moving anywhere nearby. She walked along the sidewalk with her head down, thoughts wandering.

She did not notice the man who was following her.

At least, not until he placed his hand on her shoulder. Long fingers, solid grip.

She was about to turn back to see who it was, but then the man's voice said, 'Keep walking, will you?'

It was the type of voice that compelled Mugdha to continue walking. There was something terrifying in its tone. Firm yet calm, soft yet harsh. The muscles in her intestines dwindled.

The man spoke for the second time. 'And put your hands behind your back. Do not even think of disobeying me.'

Mugdha did as she was told. She kept walking, hands behind her back. Her steps became shorter, partly due to fear and partly because she was nearing her car. She was not sure whether she was supposed to enter it.

She found out soon.

The hand on her shoulder was replaced by a pointed object. It poked her back, just under the base of her neck. The entire switch happened in one motion. Quick hands. The man gradually moved the pointed object lower and poked her lower back with it, right at the place where the tail popped out from the primitive man ten thousand years ago.

The man spoke for the third time when they were a foot away from the boot of the car.

'The keys,' he said and then threw an arm towards Mugdha. A panic rode her insides. *He knows which car I drive.* She took them out from her purse.



The man revealed himself for the first time when he walked around Mugdha with his arm still extended and palm still open. Mugdha placed the keys on it. The palm wrapped itself into a fist. At the same instant Mugdha saw her attacker's other hand. It was holding the pointed object, a knife. Its silver blade was relatively longer than the average kitchen knife. Mugdha was sure that it was also much sharper than the average kitchen knife.

She moved her gaze upwards, away from the hands and to the man's face. It suggested that he was young. Over twenty but definitely under thirty. He had an extremely prominent Adam's apple protruding from his throat. He was a shade under six feet and very thin. Not exactly snake-like, but he would've maybe come close to that state after a week of rigorous starvation. It was evident from his neat side tapers that he had a fresh haircut. He did not have a moustache and was clean shaven.

He put the key in the small hole on the boot of the car and swung it open.

'Get inside it,' he said and flicked the hand which held the knife towards the open boot. He then raised his voice. 'Now,' he said.

He then reached under his thin green jacket, under which was a gun. The man his agent it out and held it close to his body, in his right hand which was bent at the elbow. Mugdha could only see its silhouette. But that was good enough to tell her what it was.

The gun was a Remington Model 870. A shotgun. Its cartridge contained shells loaded with a buckshot. They were easily available in almost all states and relatively simple to shoot after some basic training.

She looked at the gun and then at the man. Her body was cold and she could not feel anything but fear flooding inside her. She did as the man said and entered the boot.

'If you say any word or make any sort of a noise, then that will be last thing you would've ever done,' he said. 'Got it?'

Mugdha saw the man extend his long and thin arm and grab the bar on the boot. She rapidly saw the light outside disappear as the boot closed with a thud.

The car shuddered with its vibrations and Mugdha's tremors.

The most profitable hour had begun at Jerry's. Eight fifty-five in the evening. Pleasant melodies were playing at a volume that was just soft enough for it to not interfere with side conversations.

Soon, all the tables were occupied, even the couch. The café was dominated by young couples who looked into each other's eyes and stuff. Some people were standing at the counter, waiting for a table to get vacated.

Arjun and Kanaka were flocked from all sides by early twenty year old girls and boys. Just when they were starting to feel old, some of those who were not on dates, fleetingly checked both of them out.

'We've still got it, haven't we?' Arjun said.

Kanaka flashed him a warm smile but did not say anything. Arjun tilted his glass entirely in his mouth and the final few drops of the red watermelon juice trickled down his throat.

'What're you thinking about?' he asked as he put his glass on a dextrously carved wooden coaster.

Kanaka didn't answer.

She was lost in thought. She appeared to be thinking about some hypothetical situation. The buzz of the café chatter and the occasional annoying loud laugh consumed the air.

The same waitress came to their table once more and asked if they wanted anything else. Arjun pointed with his thumb at his empty glass and ordered another watermelon juice.

The waitress' reaction was cold and she turned to Kanaka with a lot more enthusiasm, hoping for a larger bill. Kanaka disappointed her even more by not ordering anything. The waitress had a look of disbelief on her face.

He called out to her after she had turned around to leave, 'I'll also have that chicken salami sandwich of yours. The one that is listed in the specials of the day on the blackboard outside the door. Please pack it for me so that I can take it away.'

The face of his fitness trainer popped up in Arjun's mind. He hesitated for a flash and said, 'But please make it with less butter.'

The waitress turned to him with a smile. 'That's a good choice,' she said. 'I'll be right back with your order in a few minutes.'

Kanaka kept her elbows on the table and leaned forward. She said, 'I had fallen ill in my first week during my semester abroad. I was missing my home as well. I had a boyfriend back here in Pune whom I had just started seeing. But then one evening Mugdha took me out to a Mexican eatery. The place was raising funds for a cancer charity so it had all kinds of objects for sale. They also had karaoke where we sang a song together. Johnny Cash's 'I Walk The Line'

'Interesting choice.'

'I'm quite a singer, just so you know.'

'I'm sure. Everyone must have been dazzled by your voice,' Arjun said. 'Damn, now I wish there was a karaoke here too.'

She continued, 'That evening opened me up. I needed that small burst of confidence. And you know what? I wasn't aware of this until a few days after that evening but Mugdha's mom had died from cancer a semester before. But Mugdha never even once hinted that she was mourning a loss herself. So, I know that right now, even though she's going through a lot, she will allow only a little to reach the surface. It is like she has this built in inner firewall which puts a brake on anything that wants to come to the surface.'

Arjun nodded his head. 'Did you want to accompany her to the lawyer? Would you have gone with her if I wasn't here?'

'No no, you heard me. I'll meet her in some time. It wouldn't have been any different even with you not here. I would've probably been on my way home right now with the company of some take away food sitting on the back seat of my car.'

Kanaka paused. Then the sound of her voice lulled over everything else that Arjun was thinking about. 'But this, here,' she said as she flicked her finger between them, 'Is much better than that. It is much more comforting than binge watching something on television whilst guzzling take-away food.'

Arjun smirked. 'But we have barely spoken though.'

'That's the characteristic of a wonderful conversation.'

Arjun saw the waitress emerge from the kitchen over Kanaka's shoulder but she wasn't carrying his order. She was holding a tray which had several cups and a plate on it, which she gave to three people who were

sitting on a round table right beside the sofa sets.

She again disappeared into the kitchen.

Arjun said into the soft hum of the music, 'Does Manoj still work at the same bank as he did when he moved here?'

'No. After moving here he worked with Amex for two years, but then he was offered a job in at another bank. He joined them some months ago. I think it was four or five months ago. They offered him a better salary and the hours were better. Plus, he got to travel on the job. But I wonder whether it was the right decision.'

Arjun anchored up straight in his chair. Elbows on the table, chin on closed and clasped fists. 'Why do you say so?'

Kanaka dug in her purse and kept her share on the table, alongside Mugdha's part.

She said, 'I don't know. I mean it could just be a coincidence. I'm not so sure. It might not even have been related, but I cannot help but think that there is a connection. I just...'

'What connection?' Arjun said as he interrupted Kanaka for the first time that evening.

'Manoj travelled a lot, right? He had been going a lot to Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai off late to meet a client.'

## TEN

The waitress suddenly emerged from almost nowhere. She was carrying a brown paper bag in her hand which she placed on the table. Arjun tilted it slightly and peeped inside. The salami's whiff swirled inside his coiled and untrimmed nostril hair. He lifted his head and thanked her. She kept their bill on the table and turned away to go to the kitchen.

Arjun and Kanaka got up to leave and their table was promptly taken by a couple who had been standing at the counter. A small bell at the door

tinkled as they walked through it. Arjun noticed the bell was on the outer side of the café door, so it tinkled anytime someone entered or exited it.

*Good marketing strategy.*

Outside, just like Mugdha, both felt a whip of the light thread of cold air. It was nine fifty-six and the streetlamps seemed to have crawled lower and gotten brighter and yellower. Arjun walked along with Kanaka on the sidewalk. His wooden stick made a distinctive sound against the concrete.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Arjun said, as they approached Kanaka’s car.

‘Yes. I would feel a lot better if you did because you have been extremely quiet since we left the hospital.’

‘I’m glad you noticed that. But don’t read too much into it. I just didn’t want Mugdha to feel bombarded suddenly. I still feel that she would’ve been more comfortable and would’ve spoken to you in detail had it not been for me.’

They crossed the road and saw Kanaka’s Toyota up ahead, about six cars away. Arjun went on. He said, ‘Coming to the question. I don’t mean to be disrespectful in any way. But how were Manoj and Mugdha doing as a couple? Was everything as rosy as it was when they had first met?’

‘They were going pretty well. I mean, every relationship has to through its difficulties to evolve and mature, right? To emerge stronger? But overall they were going nicely.’

‘Nothing apart from that? Not even a little altercation somewhere down the line?’

‘No, Arjun. They were happy. Why do you ask?’

Arjun shrugged his shoulders. ‘Just curious.’

‘Can you drop me at the bus stop? I’ll take one to Deccan from there and go home,’ he said.

‘I can even give you a ride to your house directly, you know? The bus can get pretty crowded and it can also get tough to go in and out with a cane.’

‘I know you can but you also have to meet Mugdha in some time, right? Also, they have seats reserved for the handicapped exactly for that reason. I’ll do just fine. And I also need to get used to travel like this. Can’t

drive for at least another week, right? Got to make busses my best friends.'

Kanaka was standing not more than a whisker and a foot away from Arjun when he saw her shoulders sag. At least he thought they did. He might have also heard a soft sigh escape her mouth, but he wasn't sure about that either.

'Are you sure?' Kanaka said.

Arjun nodded. 'I'm,' he said and then grinned.

They reached her car which was parked directly under a streetlamp. Kanaka again flicked her wrist to twist the key in the ignition socket and the engine came to life.

At the same time, a black Renault sedan that had been parked at the end of that street veered out. Its headlights had been turned off on purpose. The tail lamps of Kanaka's car were burning yellow. The Renault followed them from a distance

## ELEVEN

They went down Chandani Chowk and Kanaka pulled to the side of the road at Kothrud Depot.

‘I guess I’ll see you soon,’ Arjun said, with one hand on the door handle.

‘You will have to see me soon. I still haven’t got your autograph. How can I then boast after you win awards that I was the one who helped the Arjun Parekh to get back on his feet?’

Arjun fixed his eyes on Kanaka’s green gaze. ‘I’ll talk about you in my thank-you speech. Maybe we can celebrate together as well.’

Kanaka smiled but Arjun did not see it completely because she turned around and swung open the door on her side, semi-circled the hood and played around with the door on Arjun’s side until it opened.

‘Dr. Sharma said that the cane is just a matter of a few months. Until the inflammation in the right knee is not completely gone,’ Kanaka said, putting one hand on Arjun’s slightly arched back.

‘The best actor award will then have to be on hold then, unless some writer has written about a man with a broken leg,’ he said. He stabilized himself after stepping out as he firmly rooted both his legs and his cane on the ground. ‘I’ll see you soon, Kanaka,’ he said.

The bright street lights revealed her sharp features. Especially her eyes. They were impeccable and green and graceful. Her eyelashes were also of the perfect length. Her nose was slightly blunt and it slanted by a few degrees towards one side. And then there was her smile. A slight curl of pink lips that twirled on every point of her oval face.

‘Yes, I’ll see you soon,’ Kanaka said. ‘We can do something over the weekend.’

‘It is Thursday today, in fact almost the end of Thursday,’ Arjun said. ‘Do you really want to wait till the weekend?’ he said and saw Kanaka light again.

Kanaka took a step forward and hugged Arjun. Her head rested on his chest. She smelt his perfume or aftershave or whatever it was that he had put

on. She liked it. His stubble grazed the top of her head. It was prickly and ticklish but she did not mind it.

‘I really appreciate you coming with me today,’ she said.

Arjun nodded his head in acknowledgement and saw Kanaka sit in her car and drive away.

He made his way to the bus stop. At ten in the night, it was far from crowded. There were only five other people at the bus stop. All looked tired after a day out. Arjun sat quietly on an occupied bench as he waited for his bus.

He made a list of things he needed to sort out. It included calling his agent to see if he can get a small gig somewhere because money was thin. He also reminded himself that he needed to buy the basic groceries and then not soon afterwards his mind trailed off and started thinking about Kanaka.

He did not know at that time one of the five seemingly normal persons at the stop was staring at his photo on a mobile screen. The person was a female. She was maybe five feet eight. She could have been in her late thirties or early forties. She was standing seventeen feet from Arjun, to his right.

She looked at her mobile phone screen and then at Arjun. Compared every centimetre of the two. It was the same man. Lean, long face, dark wavy hair and brown eyes. Straight nose and thin lips. A brown stubble slightly more than a five o’ clock shadow.

The photo she was gaping at on her mobile phone screen was taken just an hour back, so even the clothes that Arjun was wearing in the photo were the same.

Arjun noticed the woman by chance, when he turned his neck to see in the direction from which the bus was supposed to come. The woman jerked her gaze in a totally different direction straightaway.

Arjun was used to it. It had happened several times. Every now and then someone found his face familiar because of his stints on television. But they could not quite put their finger on where exactly they had seen him. At a friend’s party? Same college? An employee of a client? He shrugged it off and peeped into the parcel from Jerry’s, contemplating whether he should eat then or after reaching home.



The woman did something with her phone, nibbled at its five-inch touch screen and Arjun's photo was replaced by a new message window. She typed by sliding her ring finger on the keyboard. Once she was done, she read the message in her mind- Subject boarded bus from Kothrud Depot; seems calm. Will keep you posted on his whereabouts.

At exactly ten minutes past eleven, the bus stopped with a low whistle at the platform. Most of the people who were waiting got in promptly. But the woman who had been observing Arjun stayed out. She pecked at her phone once again and sat on the bench on which Arjun had been sitting.

Even though there was not much rush, the others at the platform allowed Arjun to step inside first. He received several warm smiles and nods of heads from others as he walked inside. A middle-aged man kept his hand on the edge of the door and allowed everyone to go in before stepping inside himself.

## TWELVE

Arjun's drowsiness was quickly washed away as the bus went past Nal Stop. He felt a funny sensation all through his body. He suddenly felt excited at the prospect of sleeping on his own bed and using his own bathroom.

He got down at Deccan and hailed an auto-rickshaw to Prabhat Road that took him right to the home's doorstep. Most of the other houses in the vicinity had no lights burning. There were high streetlamps that beamed a dim light which was good enough for anyone on the road.

Arjun's house was a regular two-storeyed town house with a sloping roof. It had four windows on the front side, two on the ground floor and two on the first. The front door opened on a shallow porch in the middle. There was a garage attached to the house on the right. A balcony opened out at the back with a view of a decently large playground. The house had a front yard which was enclosed by a short white wooden fence. There was a small round table near the porch. The pile of chairs lay beside it as Arjun had left it.

He looked at his house from the dimly lit street. It belonged to his sister. But after getting married, Jui and her husband, Rahul, had decided to stay in Kolkata, which is where Rahul worked. He was the sales manager in a multinational company and his work took him to a new city every day. Jui, on the other hand, was a freelance product designer and could work even from Mars if she had her MacBook Pro and an electric socket to keep her company.

He limped a few strides and wiped the thin film of dust on the board in front of his house with his hands. Then wiped them on the back of his trousers.

He could clean most of the board and it read '13/27 Prabhat Road' in faint white letters. He pushed the small wooden door in the fence using his cane and then hobbled inside as he jumped on his fit leg. He pushed the door back, again with his cane, and it knocked back close.

He waddled through the yard over a narrow gravel path. Though the duffle bag hooked on his left shoulder contained only one set of clothes, bathroom utilities and the food parcel, he could not wait to rest it. He climbed

the two low porch steps with caution. He searched for the house keys in the side pocket of his bag.

A minute later, he was inside his house and inhaling its beautiful cosy smell.

He seated himself on the reclining chair by the door. Flicked aside his cane and tossed his shoes and duffle bag in one corner. He rocked back and closed his eyes as he relaxed by taking long breaths.

In front of him, the sofa set lay pointed in the direction of the wall-mounted television. To its right was an open kitchen with a round dining table and four chairs to keep it company. The staircase leading to the first floor was beside the dining table.

It was a whisker over one and the only sound in the house emanated from Arjun's stomach. His eyelids were heavy because of fatigue. Virtually no sleep in the past day, a lot of walking and nearly an hour and a half of bus commute. He also reckoned that the sudden burst of adrenaline rush while he was with Kanaka had given him the impression of feeling energetic.

He got up sluggishly. His eyes might have been half closed. He prodded in the duffle bag for the food and broke step for the kitchen to heat it. He thought he would be able to walk without using the cane. So, he let it rest against the reclining chair. He had not yet taken his evening medicines. That meant no painkiller since breakfast.

Two points in his right knee flared.

A burning sensation shot upward, right up to his groin. He collapsed on the carpeted floor. His hands reached out to his knee to avoid hitting it on the ground. He managed to land on his left side, his healthy side. The pain reduced but only after sending vibrations throughout the upper part of his right leg. As it receded, he scrambled on the floor and picked up the cane by stretching his hand sideways.

He stood up straight by putting all his eighty kilos on the cane and his left leg. He then trudged to the kitchen and shook off the cloth covering the microwave. Put the parcel inside and turned the knob to heat it for twenty seconds.

That's when the doorbell rang. Twice. One swish followed by another. As if someone wanted Arjun to open the door urgently.

## THIRTEEN

The doorbell's sound was like one of those old-fashioned telephone rings, only more shrilled. Arjun looked at the carved door and at the calendar that hung on it. It was still languishing on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March.

Arjun's eyes opened fully in a flash. He was not expecting anyone. Certainly not his sister, because she and Rahul were going to come to his house a week from then. Jui had told Arjun about it a couple of days back.

His parents were back home in Delhi, maybe sleeping or preparing the bed. He had last spoken to both in the morning when he told them about the discharge. His father had asked whether they should come down, but Arjun had told them to continue with their initial plan which was to come in February for four months.

For a fleeting flash, he thought it could be Kanaka. He wished it was her. But then she had no idea where he stayed. Could it be a neighbour checking up on him? He sure remembered someone peeping through a curtain when he was making his way to the porch. But then his neighbours consisted of a boy in college, a lady crawling her way to make it to ninety and an old couple who he was sure had hearing problems.

The microwave started beeping in the background. *Twenty seconds up.* Arjun shot a glance towards it over his shoulder and thought it could wait. He started for the door. This time, he remembered to use the cane. He looked through the eye hole but could barely see anything but the blur of a white street light because of the dust.

Then the doorbell shrilled again, this time only once. It was followed by a voice which called out his name. Arjun recognized the voice straightaway. He twisted the latch of the self-lock and opened the door to see an old mate.

'There you're bastard. I thought you had collapsed on the ground or something,' Santosh Maria said.

'Still in one piece by the marvel of modern medicine and its side-effects,' Arjun said as Maria gave him a dude hug, after carefully manoeuvring himself around Arjun's cane.

‘I can smell something nice,’ Maria said. His voice was coarse and heavy. It suited his two one hundred and forty kilos of muscles. His eyes were already looking over Arjun’s shoulder and at the dining table to see if any food was on the offer.

‘A how-are-you or how-bad-is-the-knee would work well too,’ Arjun said, beckoning with his hand for Maria to come in.

‘You’re alive and you’re home. Albeit with a cane and a lost sense of humour.’

‘Damn you,’ Arjun said, smirking.

‘Where the hell is that smell coming from?’ Maria said and then walked past Arjun to go straight to the kitchen.

‘Don’t even dare,’ Arjun said, ‘My stomach’s growling.’

Maria found the white parcel bag and then the watermelon juice inside it. He said, ‘I’ll have a bit of whatever is inside the microwave, and you can have the rest. You have a sip of this drink here, and I’ll have the rest. Deal?’

‘Okay, agreed. But I want two sips of the watermelon juice.’

‘Watermelon what? Okay, so now then. You’re alive and you’re home and you’ve a vagina.’

‘Great, now I can have all the juice.’

‘But then two big bites of whatever’s in the microwave.

Alright?’ ‘Your generosity is admirable,’ Arjun said.

‘I saw your text about the discharge but figured I wouldn’t be able to come until tomorrow because was planning to sleep in the office today. Piles of unfinished work. The new boss focuses too much on paperwork. Has three of us working just on files.’

Arjun continued, ‘And because of that you keep your record of only coming after midnight intact. Kudos to you, Maria.’

It was one thirty by the time they finished eating. Maria ended up having half the watermelon juice. Arjun had most of the sandwich.

Arjun thought that his sleep had completely vaporized. He had read somewhere how sleep comes in cycles and how it is difficult to doze off after a cycle passes. Plus, he also reckoned that since he just had food, the stomach and intestines were doing their thing which was also keeping him up.

And there was Maria as well. He was his first friend after coming to India. He had met Maria not more than two days after coming. Jui had introduced them at some fundraiser which had been organised by her colleague. Jui was quite social that way. She could easily hit off with an acquaintance better than most people Rahul, Arjun and Maria knew, together.

A week post the fundraiser, Arjun had borrowed Maria's cop uniform for an audition. They had partied hard after Arjun had got the role, even though it was only for one episode. In it, Arjun was one of the two CID officers who had intervened in a Mumbai Police Department case because of some personal stake.

Since then Arjun and Maria's friendship had become stronger, especially after Arjun moved to Pune full time. In the middle, Arjun had gone back to England for nearly two months to play the lead in a television romance miniseries. Maria, Jui and Rahul had visited Arjun while he was shooting the finale of the show.

Maria was thirty-five and had become like a big brother to both Arjun and Jui. Even Rahul thoroughly enjoyed his company.

'Chicks dig the cane,' Maria said. 'More so when it comes with someone who has wavy hair.'

'Damaged goods.'

'You're the whole package now, aren't you?' Maria said. Then he rose from the chair, jumped up on it and pretended to hold a wireless mic in his hand and said in a high pitched loud voice, 'Watch out ladies and Jesus Christ, Arjun Parekh is in the house.'

At nearly three in the morning, Arjun and Maria went upstairs. They had taken the two rooms on the first floor. Maria was snoring before he realized. Arjun was relieved that he could climb the stairs without any real threat of tripping or aggravating his knee injury.

A sleep cycle kicked in blinks after he lay flat on his back, on the bed. He slept off without any thoughts in his mind.

The same couldn't be said about Mugdha and Kanaka.

## FOURTEEN

Kanaka stopped twice on her way back home. The first time to buy grain wheat bread. The second stop was at Mugdha's house. She didn't see any light in any windows of her house when she pulled over her car in front of it. She trotted along the solid gravel path that led up to the door. Kanaka tried the doorbell but it didn't ring. She knocked, softly at first. She could hear its echo bounce back.

No response.

She waited for a few blinks and tapped on the door a little harder than before. Crisp sounds.

No response, once again.

She called Mugdha on her mobile phone but it went straight to voicemail. A lady's voice asked her to leave a message. Kanaka sat on the low porch and waited for a spell. Looked around. The street was completely empty.

After several minutes, she turned around and ambled back into her car. Started for her house, feeling half asleep and really hungry.

On entering her house, she pulled out the food she had bought. Defrosted the chicken and put the multi grain bread in the toaster. By the time they popped up, she was slicing the cheese and putting it in boiling water. She put the garnish, mayonnaise and cheese on the table while waiting for the chicken to get cooked.

Inside ten minutes she found herself on her sofa with a chicken and cheese sandwich in her hand. The light emanating from the television screen lighted up the otherwise dark room. Kanaka took bites of the sandwich during spells of bright and flashy light. She was watching some documentary on the lives on seagulls as they migrated from the southern to the northern tip of the American west coast. The documentary ended almost at the same time as Kanaka finished eating. She tried Mugdha's mobile once more but the result was the same; a beep followed by a lady's voice telling her to leave a message.

Kanaka looked over at the kitchen counter and decided that she would clean the mess she had created after getting up the following morning. It was not much, but her legs and calves were screaming for rest. She did not even bother to go to her bedroom and crashed on the couch, which she believed was even more comfortable than her bed. Kanaka was not more than five feet

three, so she could curl up nicely on the sofa without having to worry about a part of her legs dangling about outside the cushion of the sofa.

The night became cooler as the clock ticked past four in the morning. Kanaka had hit REM sleep when her mobile started ringing.

It took her a better part of twenty seconds to open her eyes, and figure out what was happening. A hand searched the carpeted floor for her mobile. She lifted it up and squinted through the light emanating from the screen. Her eyes searched for the name on caller id, but by the time they could see any sharp image, the phone had stopped ringing.

She sat up half way, resting her back on the cushioned arm of the sofa. She did some tapping on the phone screen. An application's dialogue box popped up on the screen which showed that the call had come from a place named 'Pune City Hospital'. Kanaka knew that place as well as some people who worked there.

Her phone started ringing once again. The same number, but the ringtone, that time, seemed more urgent even though the melody was the same. Kanaka put the phone to her ear.

The voice at the other end was of a male. The man did not even wait for a flash after Kanaka picked up the phone. He started talking straightaway. 'Is this a Ms. Kanaka?' he asked.

She whispered a yes.

'I'm Dr. Kulkarni calling from the Pune City Hospital. Mugdha Joshi has listed you as her emergency contact in her insurance policy. She was brought in some minutes back with serious injuries to her head and stomach.

We found her shot multiple times. Her condition was serious and we needed to operate on her right away. She's in the operation hall as we speak. You have to understand that she was only brought in after losing a lot of blood. We are trying our best to get her back,' the doctor paused, he could hear the breath of Kanaka across the line.

He went on after a beat, 'You must be knowing that Mugdha is an organ donor. We need someone to come and sign the consent if you know...We tried calling her husband, her first emergency contact, but we could not reach his number.'

Kanaka, in the meantime, had sat up completely, trying to absorb



every word the doctor had said. She went numb. She couldn't feel her limbs. Her throat felt strange. She suddenly became conscious of her breathing. She opened her mouth but not a word came out. She felt tears build up behind her eyeballs.

Then the words came.

'I'll come right away,' she said as she got up and broke step for the door. She picked up her brown overcoat from a stand by the door. She heaped it in her hands and felt for her car keys in its front pocket.

The cold air whipped across her heavy-eyedface like she was in front of the freezer taking out the ice-cream. She turned up the heater in the car and set off.

She reached the hospital within fifteen minutes because there was not any traffic. She asked around in the hospital which was surprisingly crowded for that hour. A pharmacist told her that Dr. Kulkarni was one of the night-shift doctors of the Emergency Unit that was on the first underground floor.

Kanaka darted through the corridors and whisked past several rooms whose doors were closed. She ran down the stairs where the smell of the air conditioner and sanitizers grew stronger. The underground floor was large with the ICU occupying the area to her left and a large doorway of the Emergency Unit to her right. In the middle was a deserted waiting area that had a dozen benches.

Kanaka entered the Emergency Unit which was far more crowded than any other part of hospital she had seen that night. There were about fifteen nurses on the floor; all evenly spread with some near the pharmacist's counter, some outside holding rooms and some outside the operation hall. All of them were either reading patient charts or were in conversation with doctors.

It was as if it was nine-thirty in the morning in the Emergency Unit and midnight in the rest of the hospital.

Mugdha was in an operation when Dr. Kulkarni had called, which was fifteen minutes back. Kanaka reckoned she could either still be in surgery or she would be in the ICU of the patient holding area. She rushed towards the holding area and called out to the nurse and doctor standing in its doorway. 'I'm here for Mugdha Joshi,' Kanaka said, trying to catch her breath, 'My name is Kanaka Arora.'

The doctor took a step forward. He was young. Maybe an intern like myself, thought Kanaka. She said as they walked towards each other, 'I'm here for the woman who was shot. Her name is Mugdha Joshi.'

## FIFTEEN

The doctor was close enough for Kanaka to read the name on the metal badge clipped on the breast pocket of his white overcoat. It wasn't Dr. Kulkarni, but a Dr. Shah.

'Yes,' he said. 'She's still in surgery. Come here, have a seat.' He gestured with his hand for her to have a seat. Kanaka sat down, her pose and face showed the first signs of anxiety after coming to the hospital. She placed her hands by her side and looked up at the young doctor who was still standing. He took a seat next to her.

'I'm a doctor at the Sharma Foundation,' Kanaka said.

The expression on the face of the doctor changed subtly. It was as if he felt more comfortable dealing with a person in his profession.

He said, 'Your friend was brought in half an hour before we called you. We got a call informing us about an injured woman. Going by what the paramedics told us, she lost five units of blood before coming in and two more before we could start the surgery. She was shot in the stomach and the head. The one in the head scraped her skull according to preliminary estimates. She's still hanging in there.'

Kanaka cut in and interrupted the doctor. 'How were her vitals when she was brought in?'

The young doctor was taken aback for a flash. He seemed slightly hesitant to answer the question but said after gauging the look in Kanaka's green gaze, 'She was not breathing and neither could we find a pulse.'

'What about her blood pressure?'

The doctor was not used to being asked questions by a patient's friend or relative. He was becoming slightly uncomfortable. 'Fifty over thirty.'

She knew that the vitals were not promising. The low blood pressure and no pulse was an indicator of less oxygen supply to the brain.

Mugdha could have died there and then, even if it had not been for the bullets in the stomach. But her body, Kanaka guessed, would've gone into a shock. That would've kept her heart going and tempted whoever the attacker

was to shoot more times. The blood loss from the stomach wounds would've been the end but something had kept Mugdha going. Kanaka knew that even if the surgery was successful, the damage to Mugdha's brain and intestines was going to be immense. Some brain functions would be impaired.

The young doctor sat beside Kanaka, not knowing what to say. Kanaka was staring at the door of the operation theatre waiting for someone to walk out and tell her what was happening. At thirty-three minutes past four in the morning, a doctor walked out of the OT and towards Kanaka. He introduced himself as Dr. Kulkarni to Kanaka.

Kanaka remembered seeing him somewhere but she could not figure out where. He was white and tall and had a small scar over his left eyebrow. His eyes were the colour of ash and so was his hair. He was maybe in his mid-thirties. Her thoughts were interrupted by what Dr. Kulkarni said next.

'We tried our best but the damage before she was brought in was tremendous,' he said, placing a hand on Kanaka's shoulder. 'I know this is a hard time, but you have to sign this. She wanted to donate all her organs. We have to secure whatever is left as soon as possible,' he said and handed Kanaka a paper and pen.

She scribbled her signature and settled back on the metal bench. Then the news sunk in. She could not react. There were no tears, no anger but just disbelief. The world around her trailed off. It seemed to linger far away somewhere in a distance and a forlorn lull. Her body sagged on the bench.

The next thing Kanaka remembered was water being splashed on her face. It was not like she was standing under a shower. It was more of a gentle sprinkle that moistened her eyelashes. Her skin was burning. The cold water felt comforting. Then Kanaka heard a voice. It was of a woman. Then she felt a hand over her shoulder. It felt soothing. It was a woman's hand. There was a ring on it.

Who is it speaking in the background? Kanaka opened her eyes.

The bright tube light blinded her and her palms covered her face.

The blur cleared out as Kanaka rubbed her eyes. There was a woman standing to her right. She was holding a mug in her hand and sprinkling water on her face. There was another woman, who was sitting on a chair, checking the strapped blood pressure machine on her left hand.

'You passed out,' the woman with the mug said. 'We started you with

glucose through the IV. Your vitals look good now. Everything is normal. We turned off the IV some minutes back.'

Kanaka needed a few more blinks to realize what was happening. She noticed she was still in the hospital and was being looked after by two nurses. She looked at her left hand and saw the band aid where the IV needle would've been inserted. She mumbled, 'I must have been shocked.'

'You were, dear,' the mug nurse said, feeling her wrist for a pulse.

Kanaka nodded. There was a dull throb in her head, towards her temples. She pressed the hurting spot with her index fingers.

'The low energy levels will cause the headache. You better take some aspirin for that,' the same nurse said again. 'The doctor said you can leave after we observe you for half an hour after you regain consciousness. I'll call for someone right now so he can check you.'

Kanaka could only leave the hospital at five forty-five. She had eaten a pack of glucose biscuits and was carrying a bottle of pain killer pills along with her, tucked in her coat pocket as she climbed up the staircase to go out. Her headache had receded and so had the shock and numbness in her mind. She felt slightly out of breath as she ambled into the underground parking lot. She sat in front of the wheel in her car and stared ahead. After several thoughtless minutes, she started the car and drove out of the parking lot.

The air was still cold, but the sting seemed to have been sucked out by the rising sun. It was not fully up yet. It was the sort of hour that enabled photographers to earn a living. The sun was just about crawling up, making the sky seem as if it was made from gold. There was also an odd cry of a bird, a sound almost unknown to a 21<sup>st</sup> century baby.

Kanaka manoeuvred her Toyota hatch at forty clicks an hour. The streets were not crowded then, but in two hours cars and pedestrians would swarm every inch. Kanaka knew Arjun lived somewhere near Deccan.

She pulled the car over to call Arjun. Her stomach churned. She felt as if her intestines were getting tied in a knot. She kept her head on the wheel and felt tears form behind her eyelids. They rolled down her cheeks. Her fists clenched the steering wheel. Her fingers pressed it hard until they ached.

## SIXTEEN

The sun was up by six seventeen in the morning. Arjun's room remained dark because the curtains had been drawn to a close.

Arjun had slept as well as he ever had. He had not experienced luxury of the warm comforter and the fluffy mattress for a long time. But he could not sleep uninterrupted for long. At six minutes past seven his mobile phone started ringing. His hand searched for it on the side table. He touched the base of the lamp shade and the cord of the laptop charger before finding the phone.

He recognized the voice at the other end. It was feminine and sweet and he did not mind getting up to it every day. His eyes were still a thin line, but his mouth had curled into a subtle smile.

'It is Kanaka. Arjun, I've to tell you something. It happened some hours back. Mugdha is dead. Someone shot her.'

Arjun's eyelids opened in a jiffy. 'The hell? How?' Arjun said, before he realized they were dumb things to say.

Kanaka then narrated the proceedings of the night starting from the call she received from the hospital. The tone of her voice was measured at first but by the time she reached the end, her speech was fast and disarranged. Arjun sat up on his bed with his legs hanging from his bed.

'Where are you now?' Arjun said, cutting through what Kanaka was saying.

She paused and Arjun heard her breathe in. It was a deep breath which he reckoned was predominantly taken from the mouth. 'I'm back at my house now. Reached just half an hour back. Took a bath and ate something to avoid fainting once again.'

'Don't go anywhere, I'm coming there. Text me your address.'

'But you cannot come all the way. You can't even drive right now.'

'I've a friend over who can drop me. I'll see you in sometime. This is not up for debate.'

Arjun had a stale taste in his mouth. He squandered to the bathroom. Splashed some water on his face and brushed his teeth. Then he rushed downstairs, as fast as he could with his cane. It made a cracking sound on the wooden stairs which told Maria he was coming.

Maria emerged from the kitchen with a large white mug in his hand. 'I was wondering when you would pop up. You're in time. I was just about to leave.'

'Good. You can drop me on your way to work,' Arjun said, standing on the platform between the two staircases.

'Yes, but you need to be ready,' Maria said, flicking his wrist around to look at his watch, 'in the next four minutes.'

'Give me ten,' Arjun said, starting down from the platform.

'Not possible. Homicide case. Need to be at the crime scene urgently. '

'Who was killed?' Arjun said, now just two steps from the bottom of the stairs.

'A woman. She was shot multiple times. It will mostly be mugging gone wrong but we still have to look at it.'

'What's her name?'

'I don't know.'

'Is she an overweight woman?'

'I don't know.'

'Is her name Mugdha? Is she overweight? Will you ask?'

'I'll find out in sometime. I'll call and tell you her weight and height too and also if she has any pimples on her face or any scars on her body which would make her stand out.'

'Why did you say it was mostly a mugging gone wrong?'

'Are you always this cranky in the morning? I pity your ladies. No wonder they slip out at night' Maria said, taking a sip from the mug.

He then kept it by the sink and turned to Arjun's face which bore the expression which is rampant in most hour-long classes with over a hundred students.

Maria said, 'The neighbourhood. That's why. The place where the

woman was shot is known for muggings and is generally deemed unsafe, even during day. Three murders have been committed there in the past two years. All mugging related. Now this is the fourth.'

Arjun entered the kitchen and poured coffee into another white mug till Maria had finished talking. He took a sip and said, 'What if I tell you I know the name of this woman and that I had met her last night?'

'What are you talking about?'

'I'll tell you on the way,' Arjun said, pouring his coffee into a thermos. He flung it across the kitchen to Maria, who was standing beside the reclining chair.

Maria then called one of his subordinates and asked some questions about the homicide. Arjun's clairvoyance surprised him. 'She's in her mid-thirties. Name is Mugdha Joshi,' Maria said.

'Then she's the same woman that I met.'

Maria took a step forward. 'How the hell did that happen?'

'I'll tell you in the car,' Arjun said as he walked up to Maria.

Maria did not respond. He turned around slowly, and his back faced Arjun.

Arjun said, 'Also, please drop me at a bus stop near your crime scene. I'll go to Kanaka's house for some time and then come back in the afternoon. We can have lunch together then.'

The clouds had gathered and the sun rays were weak, a stark contrast to the previous day. Arjun guessed people would be happy to get respite from the heat. He stepped out with Maria.

He never made it back.

## SEVENTEEN

The clouds were grey but high. They were gathering quickly though. The sun was somewhere behind them to the east. Arjun could see a dull blob of silver amid the grey. A cool draft was sweeping from right to left. Sea to land, just like when it is about to pour down. The cold morning had numbed



the engine of Maria's car. It refused to start until he put the heater on full blow and revved the engine several times.

'Now the woman, Mugdha Joshi' Maria said. 'What do you know about her and why the hell did you meet her yesterday?'

Arjun told Maria about Kanaka and their little meal at Jerry's with Mugdha. He also told Maria about the arrest of Mugdha's husband and Kanaka's call in the morning.

'I know about Manoj Joshi. I've been involved in that investigation. But the case against him is air tight. We have incriminating evidence,' Maria said. 'The forensics prove it was him and we also have eye witness accounts placing him at the site of the murder. It was a shabby job, to be honest. He was also caught entering the building just before the murder.'

The tone of Maria's voice was of someone who was proud of his work.

He said, 'Also, someone at the precinct had interrogated Mugdha Joshi. She had mentioned that she and Manoj were in their house all day. But that was obviously a lie. The camera's footage places him in the building on that day. Vijay Kamra was killed between six thirty and seven thirty. The time stamp in the CCTV footage was four minutes past seven when Manoj moved out of the building. He had four hours to get back. The traffic would've tested the timeframe but he could have made it. And as I said earlier, the forensics and eye witness accounts also nail him. Also, Manoj Joshi has admitted to the crime.'

Arjun did not say anything. He continued looking out of the window. There were a dozen cars on the road as far as he could see. They maybe had another thirty minutes before the streets would be clogged.

'This Kanaka, huh? Anything going on with you two?' Maria asked.

'No,' Arjun said as he gaped out of the window. 'Not yet.'

Maria veered the car to join the JM Road. They stopped only at red lights.

Their going was swift, otherwise. The sky was becoming greyer by the minute. It had been threatening to rain in the evening for the whole of last week but to everyone's surprise, not even one raindrop had touched the ground.

‘I’ll need sometime at the crime scene. Maybe about twenty minutes. Or half an hour at most, not more. If you’re willing to wait here till then, I can drop you at Kanaka’s house.’

They could see the crime scene up ahead in the distance. The entire area had been cordoned off by yellow tapes. There were cops inside and outside the cordoned off area. There was also a small ambulance and two police cars parked just beyond the tapes. Maria pulled the car when they were half a block away from the crime scene.

‘I think I’ll take a bus,’ Arjun said.

‘Will you be able to get in and out in all the crowd? We’re closing in on the rush hours.’

Arjun said, ‘There’s a stop two blocks from here.’

‘Then I’ll drop you at that stop at least.’

Maria did not wait for Arjun to respond. He wheeled the car away from the sidewalk and pushed hard on the accelerator till they stopped by the Deccan Bus Depot. All sorts of people trickled in and out of it. Arjun became one of them as he shuffled out of the car and moved downstairs.

He turned around just before he started his descend into the bus and saw Maria start his car and move straight ahead. Arjun knew he would circle the next block to get back to the crime scene.

The bus stop was busy. Arjun had started to fancy reading the newspaper because of his time in the hospital so he picked up the State Times from a vendor who must have been in his seventies.

Arjun’s wrist watch told him it was seven fifty-one. The next bus was due in five minutes. He sat on a bench with the State times on his thighs. Right after he browsed through the headlines, the 7:56 bus announced its arrival with a loud creaking brake. He tucked both the newspapers in his pocket and got up, ready to board as soon as the bus’s doors opened. Several other people also crept closer to the edge of the platform as the hum grew louder. Eventually, it halted, five seconds later.

All the other people at the platform, waiting to board the bus, glanced across at Arjun who was standing with the help of his cane. They moved back, almost at the same time, as if the entire move had been rehearsed several times. ‘Go on buddy,’ a man from the crowd yelled. ‘We will come

in after you.'

The rest of the crowd broke into a loud applause as Arjun, with a hint of awkwardness, trudged inside through the open door. All the others entered after him.

That's why Arjun absolutely loved Pune.

All the way across in Mumbai, a man in a fine three-piecesuit got a call on his private number. He picked it up right away.

'The wife has been killed,' said the person across the line.

'The husband will be taken care of too soon.'

'There's one problem.'

'What happened now?'

'The doctor friend and the patient who got discharged yesterday. We don't know what they know.'

'Alright. Finish them. We only have a day left. We cannot afford to lose it now.'

## EIGHTEEN

Arjun got down at the end of Paud Road. Kanaka's house was one chowk northwards. He lit a smoke as he sauntered to his destination. Arjun walked carefully as he put some extra pressure on his knee every fifth or sixth step. He loved to smoke when it was overcast. The warmth in his mouth was orgasmic and he felt like keeping the smoke inside forever.

He was in Kanaka's neighbourhood after two more cigarettes. He looked around, trying to match a house to the photo that Kanaka had sent him. All the houses on the street were small and white in colour.

Arjun saw Kanaka's house to his right after walking some more. It was a small row house, exactly like the other houses in the vicinity. It had one floor that was spread over a hundred and twenty-five square feet. It had a flat roof with no terrace. There wasn't fence around the house nor was there any gravel or tiled path that lead up to its door.

Arjun read a small plywood banner outside Kanaka's house. '16-A5', he read in his mind.

He walked over a small yard and stepped on the small porch. He felt things in the pit of his gut. He was suddenly aware of every inch of his body. He smiled to himself. The excitement pulled him closer to the door. He checked his hair using the front camera of his phone.

He pressed the small button of the bell beside the door. At that exact moment, as if on cue, the phone in his pocket started vibrating. He pulled it out and gaped at its screen. It was Maria. He pressed a small green button and put the phone to his ear.

'The news just came in,' Maria said. The tone of his speech was urgent.

'Manoj Joshi was found murdered in his prison cell right now. Someone slit his throat. The entire place is a mess.'

Arjun stared at the closed door of Kanaka's house. The handle was towards the edge and at a comfortable level for someone of his height. It had an eyehole three fourth of the way up, in the middle.

He was still holding the phone to his ear.

Kanaka opened the door to see Arjun staring right back at her, seeming utterly shocked.

‘I’ll call you right back,’ Arjun said and pushed the phone back in his pocket. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked him.

Kanaka’s voice seemed to shake Arjun off from his daze. He shook his head. ‘Nothing, just a friend,’ he said. ‘We were catching up.’

Kanaka took a step forward and stood under the door frame. The pink of her nose tip was maybe a couple of tints lighter than the pink of her full lips which broke into a coy curl. It reached her pearl like eyes almost simultaneously and Arjun did not know where to focus.

He, himself, ended up smiling and extending his arms for Kanaka’s head and curly hair to sink into his chest. She hugged him tightly and they stayed that way for several blinks as if her sorrow was being sucked out gradually. She let go of him and put an arm around his waist. Her head had tilted to rest on his firm shoulder. They walked inside her house.

Arjun pulled her close in a comfortable embrace. He could smell her hair and he felt like he was standing in an orchard.

Kanaka said, ‘I guess you must be hungry. You sounded like you had just woken up when I had called. Do you want anything?’

‘Oh yes, I’m hungry. Had forgotten actually. Yes please, any food would be welcome’ Arjun said as he saw Kanaka glide across the floor to go to the kitchen.

The house had looked small from the outside. From inside it was no different. The door opened into the living room that was big enough to hold a sofa, a side table, a chair and a cathode ray tube television. There was an open kitchen to the right. It had a sink, a stove, a refrigerator and a rather modern looking microwave which looked out of place. Adjacent to the living room and in front of the kitchen was a bedroom whose door was open. Arjun could see a part of the double bed and a part of the dressing table mirror through the open door.

Kanaka put the remaining of her sandwich mix from the previous day’s dinner between two thick slices of multi-grain bread. She inserted a cheese slice and put the sandwich assembly inside the fancy white microwave and set it for thirty seconds. In the meantime, she poured steaming coffee into two cups and brought them outside in her hands. She joined him on the sofa

with the food.

Arjun took a bite of the sandwich. The juices spread inside his mouth. He turned sideways to look at Kanaka and tell her he liked it but she had buried her face in her hands.

She sobbed silently. He saw her back rise and fall. He heard a muzzled cry. It was almost unnoticeable unless paid attention to. He put the sandwich aside on the table and moved closer to Kanaka. Put an arm around her shoulder, pulled her towards him and squeezed her hand just above the elbow.

‘Can you bring her back?’ she said while taking deep breaths.

Arjun remained silent and held Kanaka tighter because she had broken into a frenzy. She started throwing, first, her arms and then her legs in every direction. Arjun pulled her closer and embraced her with his other hand from the front. She said something which was beyond decipherable. Her tears dampened his shirt. She tried to push herself away from Arjun. Her fingers gripped his wrist and pressed it hard.

He held her tighter and closer, wrapping her with his arms to stop her from going berserk. She calmed down after a brief spell. All the movements of her limbs halted.

Arjun let go of her. He moved away and grasped her cold hand. She stopped sobbing some beats later. Without saying a word, she ambled through the open door into her bedroom and disappeared inside.

## NINETEEN

After a while, Kanaka came out and went to her bedroom. Arjun followed her in. Her eyes were red and her face looked listless, a stark change from some time back.

He offered her coffee. Arjun sat beside her when his phone again vibrated in his trousers pocket. It was a message from Maria. He read it in his mind, 'Call me ASAP.' There was a brief spell of silence as Arjun reread the message in his mind. He heard Kanaka's voice in the background.

'What's the matter?' she said.

'Something about a modified car that I can drive for some days,' Arjun lied as he pushed his phone back in his pocket.

Kanaka took a sip of her coffee without saying a word.

'I'm stepping out for a smoke. Fancy coming with me?' he said to her, hoping she would say no.

Kanaka shook her head. 'I think I'll freshen up,' she said.

She was already in the bath by the time Arjun was standing under the grey clouds. The sky looked terrifying, the most threatening it had looked for the entire week. The storm was coming for sure that day, but no one knew when.

He called Maria.

'When did it happen?' Arjun said.

'I don't know the exact time. I got to know only moments before I told you about it. It was his cell mate. The warden only realised Manoj was dead when he did not respond to the eight o' clock attendance call.'

'What's the story? The cell mate insane?'

'No history of anything like that but everyone is clean until the first time, right? He was interrogated sometime back and he used the I-am-crazy card. Because of the timeframe, we reckon that the two murders are linked. I mean, how often do you find the duo of husband and wife being brutally killed in the space of four hours?'

Also, something else popped up just a while back. According to a

preliminary report, the gun used to kill Mugdha Joshi was used some months back to commit another murder. We will only know for sure after a more thorough ballistics report comes in, which will be at least a good twelve hours away.'

'You had said that this was the third murder committed in the same neighbourhood. Any connection there?'

'Looking at that angle. But we have not been able to establish connection between them so far.'

'And any theories on the use of the same gun?'

'Not yet. I remember we had hit a dead end for that murder. Right now, we are trying to figure out why Manoj was killed. According to the prison warden he had hardly spoken to anyone since being arrested earlier in the week. There was not even a vestige of confrontation anytime anyplace inside.'

Arjun lit another cigarette. He took a drag and pink mist flocked around his face as he exhaled. He opened his mouth to speak, but Maria continued. He said, 'I'll call you back in sometime when things get clear. We think there has to be some link between Mugdha and Manoj's murders.'

As Maria hung up, Arjun saw that Kanaka had waddled out of her house and had started waving her hands. She was standing in what was supposed to be the garden.

She called out Arjun's name in the still and dismal grey of the morning. Arjun was not far away, just a couple of houses to the right. After a long drag and several knocks of the cane on the sidewalk, he was standing in front of Kanaka.

She had let her curly hair free. They were moist and appeared to be darker than usual. The tip of each strand was more coiled than Arjun could ever remember. Miniscule beads of sweat had formed over her upper lip. She smelled like a fruit, maybe kiwi. Either the soap or the shampoo, he thought.

She said, her voice trembling a touch. 'I should have mentioned it yesterday.' She paused and took a deep breath, as if she was summing up courage. She waited for Arjun to bob his head.

'Let us go inside,' she said and motioned with her hand.

She started again as they walked in. 'Remember yesterday evening,



when you left our table twice? Once to use the restroom and then for a smoke? Because of that Mugdha and I were, you know, alone at our table for some minutes on two occasions.

The first time you went, both of us were silent for majority of the time. A few seconds before you came Mugdha said something to me. She said to me that she had to tell me something that had been bothering her. She also said that she and Manoj were in grave trouble. And then she saw you emerge from the restroom door and went silent. But when you stepped out for a smoke, she started talking when you were just a table away.

She repeated what she had said earlier once more. I could make out that she was greatly uncomfortable. I could also see the tears that had formed behind her eyes. But she took a quick moment and continued. She told me that Manoj had a conversation with her three days before he was arrested. She said he was really apologetic and did not mean to bring them trouble.'

Arjun and Kanaka walked up to the sofa and sat on it. They turned in their seats a little to face each other. Kanaka crossed her right leg over her left and placed her hands on her flat belly. She let out a low and a muzzled squawk as she coughed.

She cleared her throat and then continued, 'The first thing that popped up in my mind was an affair. I asked her about it but she declined it point blank and then I felt bad for doubting Manoj because even I was sure that he nor Mugdha would indulge in infidelity. Then once again we turned quiet for a few seconds before Mugdha broke the silence. She said that Manoj told her that the trouble had started when he was promoted in his company some months back. He put in the extra hours in the office and stayed up late. Even when he came home early or on time, he carried the work home. He hardly slept as he stayed up till past midnight and woke up before the sun rose. He told Mugdha that it was a temporary thing till he got used to the pressures and the tricks of the new position.

Mugdha also said that their standard of living had gone up a notch after

Manoj had been promoted. But then once about a week ago, she overheard

Manoj while he was on the phone with someone. In that phone call, Manoj was telling the person across the line about how their exploits are backed by the people who matter in the police.'

Kanaka then paused and got up from her elegant poise. She walked to the kitchen which was not more than ten feet away from where they were sitting. She opened the refrigerator's door and took out a bottle of water.

'What were they talking about?' Arjun said, pivoting in his seat to face Kanaka.

'Beer?' she asked, holding out a can in front of her.

Arjun beckoned to throw the can across. Kanaka did and Arjun stretched across with an extended arm to complete the catch.

Kanaka gulped a large sip of water. 'Yes, I'm coming to that,' she said and returned to the sofa with a soda bottle in her hand. She sat on it just like she had been sitting on it before, cross legged.

She opened her mouth to resume talking but before she could say anything there was a rap on the door. It was a crisp bony sound made by something hard, like the knocking the knuckles against polished timber.

Kanaka and Arjun looked at each other and then at the door, almost in unison. Kanaka got up, letting out a lazy moan.

As it happens on occasion, a wave swept through Arjun's body. His senses were suddenly piqued. A siren went off in his head. The reflexes of an athlete possessed, first his mind and then his body. It all happened inside a picosecond.

Then, the following blink, he sent his right hand in the air and grasped Kanaka's forearm, just as she was about to go out of reach. Firm grip. He pulled her closer, just by an inch. But that was enough to stop her in her tracks. *Mission completed.*

Kanaka turned around. She looked surprised. Her lips were perched and her eyes were a line. But Arjun was not looking at them. Instead, his left hand was reaching out for the beer can which he had kept front of him on the table. His eyes were homing in on the door like a drone.

At that exact moment, there was another rap on the door.

The cluck resounded in the otherwise silent air. Arjun tightened the grip around Kanaka's forearm. It must have hurt her a little. Not a lot, because she shrieked softly. It was the kind of sound that would've escaped her mouth if a fat kid wearing shoes would've stepped on her bare toes.

Her green eyes grew even smaller and pierced the line of vision, all

the way up to Arjun. But, again, he was not looking, did not even intend to. He had lifted the beer can, raised it in the air and brought it behind his ear as if loading it to propel it hard and far. He counted three in his mind.

*One. Two. Three.*

Nothing happened.

A beat passed. Then there was another sound on the door. Bigger than a knock. Much bigger. The door came down.

It landed on the floor, making a whacking noise. The acoustics again amplified the magnitude. But no one really cared about that because there was a man standing in the door frame with a gun in his hand.

Two things happened next.

The man adjusted the aim of his gun. It was too far to the left. It maybe would've been perfect if he intended to shoot the microwave in the kitchen. So, he first moved the gun sideways and then up and down till he was satisfied that a fired bullet would land up in the skull. But he was slightly confused, just for a fraction, as to whose skull he wanted to rip apart; Kanaka or Arjun? He went in for Kanaka, but only after thinking about it for an eightieth of a second.

That lag was enough for Arjun.

He was prepared with the beer can. He was ready with it, behind his right ear. Subconsciously, he had been preparing for it since he was two and a half years old by playing cricket in his yard every day.

The most crucial throw of his life was coming up. Like any great athlete he let his instincts take over, trusting them to the crux.

The house was small. One hundred and twenty-five square feet of tiled area. Out of that, the living room would probably have been fifty square feet which put the distance between the sofa and the door at a mere thirty-five; about fifty percent longer than a cricket pitch. The maths was more difficult than the throw.

Arjun hurled the can of beer which was heavy because of the sealed pressure inside. It was cold and going at a speed of a hundred and forty kilometres per hour. It was heading straight at the man with the gun. Arjun could have thrown it quicker but he cut down on pace for accuracy. *All great athletes improvise.* He wanted to hit the man's head; preferably the temple or

forehead or even either of the eyes. The aim was to stun and disable.

The can was going at a momentum of an eight digit number. On impact, the results would've been familiar to a hammer of the size of a bowling ball hitting the skull. It would've shook up the entire head. The impact would've rocked the very core. The results would've been disastrous for the man. Immediate unconsciousness for sure. Probably a haemorrhage. Or maybe even death if the impact was at some crucial spot. Blood would've pooled out and the retina permanently damaged had the can hit either eye.

The can reached the man. It hit him on the forehead, about a fourth of an inch above his left eye. It made a deep cut. The beer gushed out on impact and spread all over the man and the floor. Soon the man's eye could see only red. He collapsed to the ground the very next instant. The gun popped out immediately, on impact against the floor.

The injury had rattled his skull. The vibrations had shuttered in deep and clattered whatever that was inside.

## TWENTY

Arjun relaxed his grip over Kanaka's forearm. He put pressure on his cane and got up. Kanaka was already standing beside him.

‘What was that about?’ she said.

Arjun lunged forward up to the door. Kicked the gun away to the left, far from the motionless body. *Just in case*. He then rested against the broken door frame and peeped outside. A car was parked in the barren garden. A light blue hatchback made by Datsun. The door on the driver's side was half open. He looked further north. Then south. Panned his vision across. Saw nothing but one floored houses and a mixture of dry and blossoming gardens. No other cars, no suspicious looking people.

‘He's not an old boyfriend or anything, right?’ Arjun said, while gazing outside and looking left and right.

Kanaka walked up to him and stood behind his back. She was still confused. She said, ‘What?’

Arjun turned around and faced her. ‘Check his pockets. I would've done it, but it will take me twice the time because of my busted knee.’

Kanaka sat down half way, resting on one leg. The man's T-Shirt did not have any pockets. His jeans had four. Two at the side and two at the back. Kanaka sent her hands through each. A spell later, she looked up at Arjun and shook her head.

Arjun marched outside as fast he could. He had chucked his cane aside so he largely hobbled on one leg. He circled the hood of the car, went through the open door and then ducked inside.

He saw that the key was still in the ignition socket. He pocketed it and then stretched across the driver's seat to pull open the glove box on the dash. There was a cell phone inside. A Nokia. Model of 1100. More black than grey. Cheap plastic. He pocketed the phone too and returned to the driver's seat. Swung open the sun shade to examine the strap for any kind of insurance or ownership papers.

Nothing.

He turned around and looked at the rear seats.

Nothing. Just a slightly soiled beige seat cover.

He crept back and felt the pockets in front of the rear seats.

Nothing.

He sat up straight. Took a deep breath and looked through the car windows. They had a light tint which could keep out the glare on a warm spring day. Arjun panned his vision outside once more. The high trees and leaves swayed a bit, the roads were getting warm and there was not a single car moving about the street. He moved his focus back to the interior of the car. He ducked into the small boot from the rear seat.

Again, nothing.

He then skipped out of the car and went back inside the house.

‘Take your car keys. We need to leave,’ he said to Kanaka who had been looking at what he was up to from where the door would’ve been.

‘What is happening?’ she said. ‘And how did you know about that man? Why were you ready with the beer can?’

Arjun was tall and handsome and persuasive. He put his palms on Kanaka’s sleek shoulders and pressed them gently with just his fingertips. ‘I’ll tell you. But we have to leave right now. Someone might come looking for this guy,’ he said, jerking his head at the motionless body on the floor. ‘But why did he want to kill me. Or was it both of us?’

Arjun put a finger on Kanaka’s pink lips. He felt her warm breath graze his nail and knuckle. ‘I’ll explain. But not now. Later. Please, your car. Now.’

Kanaka went to her bedroom and came out about a minute later with a small purse in her hand. Her hair was a tad dryer then before but it was still not tied up. Free flowing dark curls. She had put on an overcoat but otherwise was in the same clothes as before. Light blue denim jeans and an orange T-shirt that just about reached her waist. Every now and then, Arjun could see her pierced belly button. It had a silver ring clipped around it.

‘Do you have another can of beer?’ he said.

‘You got to be kidding me,’ Kanaka said.

She then produced a black hair band from somewhere which she held in her mouth, between her incisors. She sent her hands in her hair to hold it together and tie them into a bun with the rubber band. She did all of it while

going to the kitchen and swinging open the stained refrigerator door.

‘You want to drink this or hurl it towards men coming here with loaded guns?’ she said.

Women’s multitasking abilities always fascinated Arjun. He found it to be consistent in every woman he had truly known. That trapped him even more.

He went over to the unconscious man and bent down to pick up his gun that he had kicked some yards away from him. It was a Glock 17, a gun that is used extensively by law enforcement agencies all over the world.

He knew about it because one of the guest screenplay writers of his show in the UK had spoken to him about it. The playwright had talked highly of the gun’s accuracy. It had the ability to hold seventeen rounds and that’s where got its name from.

He had used a dummy Glock 17 for one episode but that was made out of plastic and hard card board like paper. But what he held in his hand was the real deal with real bullets.

Arjun had wondered why the man did not have extra rounds on him or in the car. He got the answer when he held the pistol in his hand. Seventeen bullets are more than enough for one male and one female; especially when one of them is crippled and cannot go a foot without limping like a drunk man at four in the morning.

Arjun tucked the gun inside the tight strap of his briefs.

‘Let’s go,’ he said, taking the beer can from Kanaka’s hand. He broke step for the door and Kanaka straggled behind him.

The clouds had become heavier and petrichor had consumed the air. Kanaka darted back to her room and came back wearing a warm full sleeved sweater. She got into her car and despite the coolness in the air, the hatch started straightaway.

‘Where to?’ she said.

Arjun, himself, didn’t know where to go. He was trying to get a hand of what had just happened. ‘Just keep driving and get out of here,’ he said, ‘We need to head to more crowded areas. Some place like Koregaon Park.’

‘Are we going to call the police?’

Arjun thought about the question for a spell. *Manoj was telling the*

*person across the line about how their exploits are backed by the people who matter in the police.* Why, he thought. He decided to go with his gut feeling for the second time inside thirty minutes.

He said, 'Not them directly. I've a friend who is a cop. I'll channel it through him.'

'When? Because that man's condition will deteriorate with every second of delay.'

Arjun's eyes were toggling between looking out through the window and searching the rear view mirror for any car that could be following them.

He said, 'Let him be on his own. He took it upon himself. He had it coming.'

Should have been hit by a truck or something a long time back.' Kanaka did not say anything.

Arjun rolled down the window on his side by an inch. Its lever was as tight as it was last evening. 'Do you mind?' he said as he took out his pack of cigarettes.

## TWENTY-ONE

Kanaka drove at a steady speed of forty kilometres an hour. Arjun called Maria and apprised him with the events. Kanaka was silent and patient as she listened to their conversation.

Arjun breathed a lot better with every kilometre they covered. Kanaka was taciturn and seemed a bit shaken by everything. A lot had happened around her in the past twelve hours. Her eyes were slightly swollen.

He said, 'Hey, we will get through this, okay?'

Kanaka said nothing. Arjun knew that she was a strong and an independent woman. She was massively ambitious and worked day and night towards her goals. But she was not familiar with cold blooded murders. She had never seen a gun in her life in the hands of anyone other than a law enforcement officer. She had never seen anyone bleed out at her doorstep. And she had most definitely not expected any of it to happen so fast.



Especially not in the matter of one night. Her mind had become numb and she was desperate to believe that everything would eventually turn out to be just a nightmare.

But then she surprised Arjun with her mental potency, not for the first time. He was sure it would not be the last time either. He noticed Kanaka's face gradually relax. The thin furrows beside her eyes evanesced.

She cleared her throat. Her eyes were still fixed on the road. 'So yes,' she said, 'I was telling you about the conversation that Manoj was having on the mobile phone. Mugdha could not hear everything. As I said earlier, she only overheard a part of it.'

Manoj was speaking softly, not whispering, but, you know, trying to lower his voice just enough to ensure that it was not heard outside the walls of that room. He told whoever he was talking to that he needed more time but the coming month offers several opportunities because two board meetings have been scheduled. He talked about all the big bosses coming for it. The Managing Directors of different circles, major stock holders and the board of directors. Mugdha heard Manoj say that they were going to discuss proposing several merger offers to smaller banks and start working on trying to expand their market share.'

Kanaka inhaled deeply. She sunk deep in the seat and spun the steering wheel with one hand to overtake a car that had slowed down considerably.

She said after cruising past it, 'Mugdha told me that Manoj then talked about some technical stuff like the government's fiscal rates and stuff. Mugdha didn't understand much about it. Then the conversation took a drastically different turn. But hold on, before that the other person may have done most of the talking because Manoj did not speak for several minutes.'

Then when Manoj finally spoke again, he told the other person that he needed money to keep the operation floating. They negotiated an amount and after several minutes Manoj got his way. It was decided that he would be given five hundred thousand dollars in two instalments. Mugdha said that Manoj was furious when he was told that it will take a minimum of two or three days for the money to be wired. Then Manoj did not say anything for a while before he began talking about someone.'

Kanaka then paused and shot a cursory glance to her left at Arjun as

she turned from her neck. ‘You wouldn’t believe who he was talking about.’

Arjun raised his eyebrows as he exhaled some more smoke into the car cabin.

‘Kamra, Kanaka said, ‘Manoj was talking about Vijay Kamra.’

Arjun whipped to one side. ‘Holy shit.’

‘I know. He went through a general bio of Vijay Kamra. Like his date of birth, job profile and family history.’

‘That will put an entirely new twist in his murder investigation because the police think that the two had nothing in common except for working in the same building. There is absolutely no record of them ever engaging in any sort of a communication with each other.’

‘And that is not it,’ Kanaka said. ‘After talking about that Kamra guy, he told the person across the line to pay off the concerned people. He said any amount will do, as long as their mouths remain sealed. He also said, and I’m quoting Mugdha’s exact words here, “If they don’t agree, deal with them your way”. Mugdha was terrified, Arjun. Really terrified.’

They took the south exit of Range Hills and entered Khadki.

Kanaka turned and looked at Arjun when they stopped at the first red signal they hit upon exiting the Khadki. The city noise was close and loud because the windows had been rolled down. The smell of burning petrol was crisp and it seemed to hang in the air along with the other car exhaust pollutant particles that were greyer than the sky.

Arjun folded his arm on the window sill and said, ‘You said that Manoj was sorry for what he had done. Did Mugdha tell you anything else about that?’

Kanaka’s gaze eyed the timer at the top of the red light. It was still six seconds before it would turn green and they could go. She heard the cars behind her start, and then she started her own.

She said, ‘I don’t know what he told her. All she could complete telling me was how sorry he was for what he had done. That’s why I was going to go to her house last night.’

Kanaka manoeuvred it carefully past other cars. She mostly stuck to the middle lane. They rolled towards KP. Dove into the crowded streets one signal and one block at a time. Neither of them spoke. There was an odd

sound of a car-horn and of some pedestrians chuckling somewhere. And then there was the general buzz of any vibrant city.

But all those sounds moved to the background when a phone started ringing in the car. The ring's sound was exactly like that of an eighties landline telephone. It emanated from Arjun's pocket, from the mobile phone he had picked up from the guy who had tried to put a bullet in their heads.

## TWNETY-TWO

Arjun had to struggle a bit to get the mobile phone out of his pocket. He got up halfway in the seat and fiddled inside through his wallet and house keys. The ring grew louder as he took it out and held it in front of his face. The caller ID didn't flash a number, it was private.

He thumbed the large green answer button to answer.

Kanaka was looking at the road ahead but her ears had zoned in on the conversation that was about to happen beside her.

Arjun put the phone to his ear. The voice at the other end sounded urgent. It was deep and belonged to a man. It said, 'I didn't like the stunt you pulled off at your friend's house.'

Arjun had been waiting for the moment since he had taken the phone. He was surprised it had taken so long to ring. He said calmly, 'Who is this?'

The man's voice became deeper. There wasn't a vestige of calmness in it. 'Knowing that wouldn't help your case. But for the sake of convenience, you can call me, let me think, Charlie.'

Then Charlie went quiet for a beat. His voice erupted from the ear piece once more. 'You have something that belongs to me and I want it back. You and I can go our separate ways when you return it. This conversation and this entire morning would've never happened. But if you disobey me then you're never going to see or hold that lady friend of yours ever again. You need to give me what I want. If you try to act funny and decide to go to the police with it, believe you me, that will be the last thing you would've

done. You will be called again soon. Be ready.’ Arjun did not respond.

In a couple of beats the line went dead and the buzz of the city took over the lead vocals once more. Kanaka slowed down the car as they approached another red light. They were on a slight slope, so Kanaka pulled up the handbrake lever to her right.

‘Who was that?’ she said, her eyebrows high up on the forehead.

Arjun was not sure what to tell her. She had been through a lot. She had put on a brave face. She was somehow managing to hold her own and Arjun did not want to test her mental fortitude any further but at the same time he believed in one hundred percent transparency and did not want to keep Kanaka in the dark.

He pushed the mobile phone back in his pocket, still unsure what to say. ‘It was that guy’s papa or someone. Called himself Charlie. He realized his incompetent little son had not come home back on time. Sounded pissed and irritated. He thinks I’ve taken something that belongs to him. He now wants

it back.’

‘What have you taken from him?’ Kanaka said.

‘I wish I knew. But it must be something important. He desperately wanted it. And he threatened me not to go the police with it.’

A green light flashed on the signal and Kanaka put a foot on the pedal of the accelerator after lowering the lever of the hand brake.

There was silence in the car and the outside noise swirled in once again.

Arjun was trying to make sense of things. A lot had happened. He looked through the window with squinted eyes and tried to put all the events in perspective.

Manoj and Mugdha were killed in one night. Any vestige of doubt that their murders were not related had bolted out of his mind. They had to be connected. Plus, what Mugdha told Kanaka had to have some relevance too. And why didn’t Mugdha tell Kanaka anything earlier? And what exactly was Manoj talking about on the phone and who was he speaking to? Why did a man come to Kanaka’s house with seventeen rounds of 9 mm bullets?

Then the call he just got off. Someone knew that they had escaped

somehow. Someone also knew that he was with Kanaka. *How?*

Arjun again looked out through the car windows. His eyes searched for anything that looked amiss. But he highly doubted he would see anything that would pique his attention. Eleven in the morning is not the most crowded time in Pune but still tens of thousands of people wander in cars and walk on pavements. There was absolutely no chance to know if they were being followed unless the person we are looking for was sitting on a big fat elephant.

He thought further about the phone call he had just received.

*That man thinks I've something. What is it?*

*Think.*

He shut his eyes hard. His fingers tapped some fast but offbeat tone on the grey plastic of the car door.

His mind moved to the mobile phone in his pocket that he had picked up from their attacker. Something entered his mind. He had read about it several times in different magazines. The line was played thousands of times in almost each television detective show he had ever watched.

*The mobile phone can be tracked.*

He was not an expert on the technology of tracking, but he knew one thing for sure. So, he took the phone out his pocket and pressed the large red key that sat under the small screen for a good ten seconds. The mobile screen went off and it displayed the maker's name as it flashed 'Nokia' on the screen. Then there was some animation that danced around on the screen that made it look like the sky on the day of *Lakshmi Puja*. And then the screen went blank.

He put the phone back in his pocket and sat patiently. Let his mind wander around and come up with a theory that made sense and put things into a perspective.

## TWENTY-THREE

*Think.*

Arjun continued pondering as their car moved ahead. They were already in Koregaon. Kanaka was a good driver. She could turn on the heat by pushing the accelerator whenever required and could also carefully twirl the car around as effortlessly as a ballerina when traffic blocked their lane.

She was a passenger's delight, not so much of a traffic policeman's.

Arjun was extremely silent; his eyes were still closed.

*Think.*

Then it came to him, in parts.

*I should focus on why they believe I've something and not what it is that they think I've. If I find why, the answer to what will be easier.*

He opened his eyes as his chain of thoughts was interrupted when Kanaka spoke. 'We need to call the police,' she said again. 'That guy said do not do that, so that is exactly what we should do.'

'You must have been one hell of a student,' Arjun said, taking out his mobile phone. 'I need to check on something before that.'

He tapped the screen several times to call Maria and then put the phone to his ear. He said, 'I need a favour. Send a police officer to my house right now.'

'Why your house? I thought that gunman came to Kanaka's house. I've asked someone to go down there. In fact, he should be there now.'

'Send someone to my house too. There has been a break in.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I'll tell you. Come to the Indian restaurant in lane 6. Kanaka and I are heading there right now and will reach in less than ten minutes. But send someone to check my house. Someone you trust. And keep it off the records.' Kanaka turned to look at Arjun as soon as he put the phone back in its place. She said, 'Let me be honest here. I'm freaking out. I do not know

what is happening or why it is happening. I do not know why my best friend was killed. Someone tried to kill all of us too, maybe just me and now on top of all that you're behaving strangely. We have not even lodged an official complaint with the police yet. I'm scared, Arjun.'

Arjun saw that some tears had built up behind Kanaka's eyes. He also noticed how hard she was trying to not let them roll down her cheeks. 'I admire you for the strength you have shown so far, I really do,' Arjun said. 'I cannot even begin to understand how hard it must be for you. But you need to hang in with me for some more time. I really need you to trust me right now. I wish I could tell you more about what is happening but I'm not sure either. I've a theory in mind but it is like shooting in the dark. Please stay with me, Kanaka. You've been brilliant so far.'

Kanaka pressed her lips against each other, still trying her best not to break down. She was partly successful too. Even if she was sobbing, it was not particularly visible on her face. Arjun looked at her and her reddened face. It was the second time in the day that she had an emotional outburst. His urge to find those responsible for the killing of Manoj and Mugdha amplified. He felt as if it was his responsibility now to look after Kanaka and the first step towards that would be to bring justice to the forth.

He realized that Maria did not know that Kanaka did not know that Manoj was dead. He texted Maria informing him about it.

Kanaka spoke as Arjun was typing. 'I just want everything to go back to how it was yesterday at this time.'

Arjun placed his forehead on his knuckles and his head bobbed subtly because of the car's vibrations.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'We will be safe with my friend. He's the detective I called when we just started. He will join us in a bit. Pull the car over near the restaurant that specializes in all food items of North East India. Forgot its name but I remember where it is. Their *thukpais* known all over the city and I know both of us could do with some of it right now.'

## TWENTY-FOUR

The first drops of rain that day were large, almost as big as pigeon shit. They started coming down in heaps the moment Kanaka parked the car half a block away from the restaurant. Arjun and Kanaka might have otherwise darted on along the sidewalk because of the rain, but Arjun could only go at the human equivalent of a snail because of his knee. He pushed himself forward as he knocked his cane on the concrete of the sidewalk.

Kanaka tucked her arm inside Arjun's to ensure he didn't trip while trying to walk briskly. They could see other Pune-kars run for cover against the rain which was threatening to come down hard. The clouds were dark grey, not yet black. But they were low and heavy and noisy. It was just before noon, but as dark as five on a winter evening. The moving cars had their wipers sweeping the windscreens. They were going at sedate speeds.

Arjun and Kanaka scampered along the sidewalk, towards the restaurant. It was called '*Purva*' which meant east in Hindi. It was a larger restaurant which spread across one floor. There was a large glass panel on the front with the name of the restaurant written in Hindi and English. Arjun and Kanaka could see the interiors as they walked past the glass towards the main door.

Arjun was a regular at the Indian restaurant because his agent loved it. Most of their meetings were at *Purva*. It was slightly beyond his budget to go there every week but all meals with his agent were paid by her so he did not mind.

He had not been there for close to six weeks and he was beginning to feel slightly hopeless with his career. He had been offered the role of a supporting character in a television show a few weeks back but he had just got out of the first of the two surgeries he had undergone. Apart from that his bread earning prospects had been zero. He had last spoken to his agent previous morning to tell her that he was being discharged. She had told him then that a new audition for narrating a wildlife show on National Geographic was coming up.

The doorman at *Purva* was a middle aged Indian man with a bushy moustache and a round and large hat. He flashed a salute to Arjun and held



open the door as Arjun and Kanaka approached it. Arjun nodded his head in acknowledgement.

The interiors of the restaurant were casual and café like with wooden tables. Polished dark. High four legged wooden chairs. High ceilings with medium sized chandeliers creeping low.

There were round tables for four or less people and rectangular for a larger party. The kitchen was not to be seen and Kanaka thought it must have been somewhere at the back. The restaurant was relatively full for a noon on a Thursday.

Arjun spotted Maria within a few blinks.

He was sitting on a round table for four by the glass pane on the other side of the door. He was in the same clothes as morning but for a dark brown coat which was buttoned up half way.

All of Maria's six feet three inches and a hundred and seventy pounds rose from the chair and greeted Kanaka with a handshake and a grin. They took seats at the round table. A waiter walked up to it, straightened the inverted glasses in front of the each of them and walked away after confirming they wanted regular water. He came once more to their table and gave them the menu card and then walked away.

Maria was the first to speak. He rested his forearms on the surface of the table and clasped his hands in front of him at his knuckles. He said, 'Arjun, you were right. There was a break in at your house. It has been ransacked and all the rooms are a mess.'

He paused and looked up first at Kanaka and then at Arjun. He could make out that Kanaka was still jittery. She was sitting on the edge of her chair and her eyes were still heavy. Arjun was leaning forward with his elbows on the table and his chin resting on the closed fist of his right hand.

'How did you know that someone would search your house?' Maria said.

Arjun told Maria about the phone call he had received on the mobile phone of their attacker. The voice was still fresh in his mind and he could quote the near exact verbatim.

'We've taken that man in,' Maria said. 'His name's Mahesh Bhatia, by the way. He's wanted for several low octane felonies like shoplifting and

stealing logos of cars. But he doesn't have any records for a serious crime. We've him in judicial custody now even though He's being given medical care in a county hospital. He's suffering from concussions because of the blow to his head.' Arjun said, 'So whoever this Mahesh Bhatia's boss or handler is, believes that I've taken something from him. I don't know what it is but I've a theory on why he thinks I might have it.'

Maria leaned forward and so did Kanaka as Arjun spoke. 'First, I need to tell you something, Kanaka,' Arjun said in a low voice. 'It happened in the morning. I wanted to break it to you gradually but unfortunately right now I've no choice but to tell you about it at once as I reckon everything is connected. Right from Manoj's arrest to the man who came to your house today and the call I picked up on his phone.'

Kanaka interjected. 'I know, Arjun. You're talking about Manoj right?'

Arjun opened his mouth to say something but Kanaka continued. Her voice was cold and its tone was flat. 'I think you accidentally sent me a message that was meant for Maria.'

Arjun's mouth opened wider and his lips made an oval.

'It is okay,' Kanaka said. 'I was going to find out sometime. And I know you were looking out for me. It is fine, really. You do not need to feel bad.'

Arjun could feel his fingertips go numb. *How could I?* He looked at Kanaka and his respect for her augmented exponentially.

She said again, 'It's fine. Go ahead. You were saying something.'

## TWENTY-FIVE

There was a spell of silence.

Kanaka looked at Maria and said, 'What is the view of the police on this? They do think both the murders are related, right?'

Maria said, 'Yes, but we cannot rule them out being not related because of certain procedures however obvious it maybe. So, two teams are working on it. A bigger and a more efficient team has been assigned to look at the relation between the two. I personally think they are, no rocket science there.'

The waiter emerged again, like a performer from a wing somewhere backstage. He poured water into their glasses. Arjun ordered *thukpa* from everyone. The waiter turned his back after noting down the order on a tablet and then walked away.

Arjun said, 'I've a theory. It hit me when Kanaka told me about the conversation Manoj was having with someone on the phone. He wanted money. Five hundred thousand dollars. And then he talked about bribing someone.'

'Bribe people, as in plural,' Kanaka interjected.

'Yeah,' Arjun said. 'We don't know why he wanted half a million dollars. We also don't know why he wanted to bribe people.' 'To bribe maybe,' Maria said.

'Maybe, but we can't say for sure,' Arjun said, 'Also, Manoj was apologetic to Mugdha and he told her that he had brought them trouble through his actions. I reckon Manoj was feeling guilty about what he was doing which was mostly illegal because it involved bribing someone,' Arjun said.

'And murdering Vijay Kamra,' Maria said.

'I get you've evidence against Manoj for the murder,' Arjun said, 'But have you been able to establish any motive?'

'Not so far. Kamra was clean. He was an honest citizen from the looks of our investigation so far. There's no reason why he should have ended up being murdered.'

Kanaka broke the pattern of back and forth dialogue between Maria and Arjun and said, 'Where does all this fit in the theory you had, Arjun?'

Arjun seemed to stare into oblivion for a spell. 'I'm trying to insert a few missing pieces. I'm also playing it in my mind to make sure it makes at least some sense. Hold on for a minute.'

A different waiter, dressed in an immaculate black waist coat and a creased white shirt, brought their food on a dextrously carved silver tray. The tray had three bowls and three spoons and forks. The waiter placed the food in front of each of them. Before leaving the table, he smiled apologetically and told Arjun that the usual *chutney* he liked to have with the *thukpa* was not available.

The aroma from the steam emanating from the hot curry of the *thukpa* consumed their table. It smelled sumptuous and people sitting a few tables across turned around to see what it was.

The *thukpa* was Arjun's favourite. He had first had it with His agent and had loved it right from the moment its aroma had flirted with his nose. In appearance, the *thukpa* came close to the American clear soup but it tasted vastly different. Its curry had herbs and spices and rings of onions which kept the spicy, sour and sweet taste buds active together. The curry had smoked and bound balls of shredded chicken which had absorbed it to some extent. But the main ingredient in the *thukpa* were noodle like long strings which were coiled in the curry.

Arjun put an entire ball of chicken along with some curry and noodles in his mouth. He devoured its taste, letting it consume him completely.

After gulping it down, he said, 'Okay so, here it goes. We've an idea that Manoj was doing something illegal which involved him at the helm of carrying out some action which required money. Let us assume that he did complete the task and did what was required. That happened a month ago. Then, a week back, he was held for murdering a person who worked in the same building as his. He told Mugdha at least some part of what he was up to, if not everything. That happened after he was arrested, right?'

He turned his gaze to Kanaka. She nodded.

Kanaka and Maria listened on as they sipped on the curry of the *thukpa*. They looked at the sheeting rain through the window. It was coming down hard. The raindrops hopped on the road.

Arjun went on. 'Why would he wait for all this time to tell his wife? Why tell her at all? I mean, there must have been some reason to even give her a slim idea of his actions. Maybe his conscience was going down for a guilt trip?

Maybe he was preparing his wife for something bigger?' Maria cut in. 'Something bigger like what?' he asked.

'Something like, maybe an escape because he wanted out and start anew somewhere?'

'Or because he was looking to involve his wife in what he was doing,' Maria said. 'It is simple. Tell her just about what is necessary and fabricate the rest of the story to get her in. Maybe put in a made up threat or something to instil fear. Then slowly break the entire account to her once she's deeply immersed in the activities so that she cannot exit for several reasons like her own personal safety, protection from the police and sheer greed of the green.'

Kanaka glared at Maria. It was a piercing stare. Maria was not looking at her but he could see it from his peripheral vision. He ignored her and said, 'It happens in a number of cases. One of either the husband or wife gradually drags the other clean person past the tipping point from where there is no exit but to continue doing the illegal work and gather more wealth. After a while, the clean person also starts enjoying it. We have seen similar things between couples and friends.'

'Maybe,' Arjun said, 'but the crux here is that she knew about her husband's activities. Once in jail, Manoj must have asked whoever that he worked for to somehow free him. Maybe there might have been a verbal brawl, maybe not.'

But in the end, he would've been declined help. That could have set Manoj or Mugdha off. She knew about Manoj's shady business and might have threatened to expose whoever was guilty for some sort of a bargain plea with the police.'

'I get it,' Maria said. 'And that is why both were killed to keep them silent.'

'Yes, my point,' Arjun said. 'No better way to stop the beans from spilling out.'

Kanaka joined the conversation. She said, 'But where does the phone

call you received fit in all of this?’

Arjun wrapped his fingers around his glass and felt the cold minute droplets of condensed water that had formed on the outer portion. He brought it to his mouth, took a sip and looked over its rim at Kanaka.

‘In order to expose the guilty, Mugdha would’ve had to have some sort of evidence with her. It could have been anything like a document, some object or an audio or video recording or something similar that would’ve borne proof of some wrongdoing.’

Arjun paused. Took a deep breath in, and then let it go.

He started once more.

‘Whoever was responsible for their deaths got them silenced but that piece of evidence which Mugdha had is still out there. Somewhere, some place. And Mugdha met her lawyer before she met Kanaka and me yesterday in the evening. Post that, she again met her lawyer. Maybe to discuss how to go about with the bargain plea.’

Arjun took another brief pause and then said, ‘So I think the killers are assuming that she must have given it to any of the three of us.’

Kanaka felt the theory made sense and bobbed her head. Maria had his cap on. He tried to find loopholes which was easy because there were plenty of them. Even Arjun was aware of it.

Maria said, ‘It sounds alright but with even a little scrutiny, there is a chance of the entire theory breaking down. It is based on a big assumption that Mugdha had some physical evidence which at this point seems unlikely because as far as we know, she knew about Manoj’s illegal activities only because he himself told her about them. If Mugdha did have evidence, how did she acquire it? Secondly, we have no proof of Mugdha asking for a bargain plea of any sort. Thirdly...’

Arjun interjected. ‘Okay, okay I get it. But think about it. It makes sense on the surface even if there are plenty of flaws.’

He panned his vision across. Looked at Maria and then looked at Kanaka. Took another sip of water and said, ‘But there’s one way we can find out whether any part of the theory is accurate.’

Maria raised his eyebrows. They were relatively thin for a man of his size. ‘What?’ he said.

‘My house was searched. Your guy went down there, right? Then a gunman came to Kanaka’s house; maybe to search it. By that logic, the lawyer’s house and office would’ve been searched too. We just have to check both for anything amiss.

## TWENTY-SIX

Outside, the sky was iron grey. Not even a vestige of the sun could be seen. Narrow and slender streams of water flowed along the edge of every sidewalk in Pune. Trickling water from the coamings of shops and restaurants and building entrances made streams at the sidewalk fatter and quicker as the minutes ticked on.

The entire length of the sidewalk along North Main Road looked like a miniature model of fast and furious rapids of level three or four. Cars were parked along either side of the road and their windows were smoked white because of the condensation. Most of the pedestrians had disappeared somewhere indoors and the car traffic was light and moving along nonchalantly. Pune was cold and dismal at one in the afternoon on a Thursday.

The breeze had picked up too and it was much stiffer than anytime Arjun remembered it to be in August. He could see the slanted direction of the rainfall in the silhouette of a balcony somewhere in the distance.

The doorman with the bushy moustache had stepped in. But he had taken that decision late, hoping that the rain would subside. The ends of both his long lapels were darkened because of the moisture. Even the right side of his turban was slightly dark and wet. Yet, he still flashed a smile as Arjun along with Kanaka and Maria shuffled up to the door to leave. They entertained the thought of waiting a spell till the downpour subdued but they quickly pulled that idea off the shelf.

Maria said into Arjun's ear, 'If the lawyer's place has been searched too, there would've been a real threat to her life. An armed man came to Kanaka's house. There is no reason why an unarmed person would go to the lawyer. If I was controlling whatever this is, I would've in fact sent two guys for the lawyer. Simple and straight logic. Bigger house and bigger office, lots of papers and books and more than a decent chance of the lawyer having a weapon for self-defence. Two men are better than one.'

The doorman swung open the door. A heavy and chilly blast of cold wind made a whooshing sound as it whirled inside.

'I'll go get my car. It is just around the corner. You guys come with



me right now,' Maria said. He turned to Kanaka and said, 'We will figure what to do with your car later.'

Maria was wearing hard rubber shoes with thick soles which were perfect for the weather. They made a thumping sound against the thin film of rain water on the road as he darted out across the street. Arjun and Kanaka could not hear the thumping for long as the sound was masked by the whirl of the rain and breeze when Maria was not more than three or four strides away.

The sky flared and spit sparks. The awning of *Purva's* entrance was long and it sloped towards the road at a lazy angle. It provided an OK cover against the rain which was being taken away from the door by the rather stiff breeze.

Arjun had to speak at the top of his voice in the wet air when he said, 'Kanaka, I apologize for Maria's frankness inside. Please do not take what Maria had to say personally. He's a cop. Has been one for nine years so he has a habit of thinking and speaking brusquely. Trust me, he means the best.'

Kanaka nodded quietly and took a step up to Arjun. A slight smile hung on her face. She put her arms around Arjun's body, gently pushing herself up by standing on her toes. She rested her head against his chest. Arjun craned his neck lower and kissed the top of her head, amongst her curls. He could feel the moist strands against his face.

The whiff of the kiwi shampoo lingered in his nasal chambers even after they sat in Maria's car. But not for long though, because the interior of the car still smelt of cigarette smoke which overpowered the kiwi scent rapidly.

'I'll drop the two of you at my house. You will be safe there. I'll also send for someone from the department to be stopped outside the house just for the sake of precaution,' Maria said. 'Then I'll head to the lawyer's place. Do you have his number?'

Kanaka eyed Maria in the rear view mirror as she said, 'It is a she. Her name is Nikita Verma.'

The modern world, Maria thought.

Kanaka borrowed his phone and typed Nikita Verma's address and phone number and stored it as a note.

Arjun was sitting at the front while Kanaka was sitting behind him. Their car went at a steady speed of thirty kilometres an hour along the left of the road. The lights of the signal glistened and scattered against the droplets of water on the unwiped parts of the car's windscreen. Their progress then became slow as Maria alternated between pushing the pedals of the brake and the accelerator. They skimmed past cars and whistled away from the insouciant walkers. It was the type of a day on which photographers would scramble with their long lens high definition cameras to take a before and after photo of the stark difference in the Pune skies within a matter of three to four hours.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

They exited Koregaon Park and entered Viman Nagar. Nothing much was said inside the car's cabin and it was one forty-six by the time they reached Maria's house. His house was a two room rented apartment on the second floor of a building. It was right behind the Symbiosis University and above a restaurant called Santos.

Maria pulled the car close to the sidewalk in his vacant parking spot. They stepped out and entered the building. Went past the concierge who rose from a metal chair and flicked his hand in greeting on seeing Maria and Arjun and eyed Kanaka for flash.

The apartment was cosy. It had a carpeted floor, some shade of brown. The light colours of the walls gave it a roomier feel. It was a standard Pune apartment with a living room that had an open kitchen. The two rooms were opposite to the main door and one of them had an attached bathroom. A small balcony opened adjacent to the rooms.

On reaching the apartment, Kanaka sped quickly to the restroom. That left Arjun alone with Maria.

Arjun said, 'There is no way you're going alone to the lawyer's house.'

'Well, then let us do one thing,' Maria said, 'I've some sleeping pills in one of the closets in the kitchen. I'm pretty sure they are within the expiry date. We can pop some in a soda and give it to Kanaka and then after she dozes off we will put her in the car boot and carry her along with us. Because there is no way in hell am I leaving her alone here.'

'You crack me up,' Arjun said. 'I would not want to leave her alone here either. I called a friend when we had stopped at your office. The friend's an ex veteran. His name is Vasu Sharma. He served at a host of places before getting an honorary discharge the Kargil War. He's the same person who started the Sharma Foundation, which is where Kanaka works.'

Vasu doesn't do much these days. Goes in for an odd consult once every week. When I was there I met him exactly four times out of which we chatted for long hours on two occasions. I trust the guy. He's perfect for this

sort of a role as well. He's trained to use a gun, would've great self-defence skills and plus he knows basic paramedics.

And most importantly, he has time today. He told me he was going to while away the rest of the day by going to a bookstore and then have a drink with a friend of his from the army. We will be back by evening anyways so he can still meet that friend of his. But he said he will be more than happy to help out right now.'

'I believe He's on his way?'

'He's here already. Got here before us. That Nissan sedan you saw downstairs? That was his.'

'He last served in Kargil. That was 1999. How old is he? Can he even maintain his balance while taking a piss?'

'Sixty-seven years old. He's fit and a robust figure. You will know for yourself soon.'

'How much does he know about what has happened?'

'The basics. I would've told him the details but then I reckoned I would do that face to face and not over the phone.'

'I believe we have got to keep the circle of those who know what is happening small.' Arjun did not say anything.

'Are you sure he can be trusted?' Maria asked.

He then went to his room to change into dry clothes after Arjun convinced him that Vasu Sharma can protect himself and Kanaka if required. Arjun dragged himself to the refrigerator and helped himself with a can of beer.

This time to drink, for real.

He popped the can and the white foam fizzled out and scattered over the top of the can but stayed inside the elevated rim.

Kanaka emerged out from the bathroom. Arjun could guess that she had just splashed water on her face. Some strands of her hair had sprawled across on her forehead, where they lay, waiting to be tucked back with the rest of their mates.

'You can take the room to the left,' Arjun said pointing in its direction. 'You'll also find a towel inside. I was the last one who had used the

room so I'm guessing my clothes would still be in there. You can wear them for now till we get yours from your house.'

'We're going to stay here for long?'

'I don't know, but at least today for sure. We are going to the lawyer's house right now. I've called Vasu Sharma. He might be walking up the stairs as we speak. He will be here with you till we get back. Okay?'

Hearing Vasu's name suddenly made Kanaka feel safer. Arjun saw some wrinkles around her eyes disappear inside a flash. Kanaka greatly admired the old man. He was a like a father figure to her. He had helped Kanaka immensely when she had first started working, both monetarily and morally.

Kanaka smiled. It was the original Kanaka smile that Arjun absolutely loved. It did not just reach her eyes, but lighted up her entire face. She suddenly broke step for him. Her elegant legs floated along the floor as she glided up to him. She then stood on her toes. Leaned up and leaned forward, towards him. Put her arms around his body. She could feel his chest and stomach muscles although they were not as toned as they once were.

Arjun rubbed Kanaka's back. She craned her head up from his chest and looked directly at his face. He stared into her green gaze. There had been something electric about her graceful eyes for the past few pulses which had fully rapt Arjun in.

Kanaka reached higher with her face. She was stretching herself as far up as possible, pressing her body against his. Her full lips got up to Arjun's chin. He felt their tenderness on his shaved chin. He put both his hands around her waist and lifted her up. Craned his neck lower. Just that much. Just enough for his lips to graze hers. They tasted sweet, much better than how he had imagined.

Then there was a rap on the door. 'When all this is over,' Kanaka whispered as he felt her soft lips grazed his ear lobe.

No alarms went off in his head this time, although his heart was racing. He could hear it thud. He could also feel it pulse on his left arm. He let go off Kanaka and placed her back down on the ground gently. He then craned his neck lower and kissed her again. This time, just a quick peck on the lips.

He then strode up to the door. Looked through the eye hole and saw

Vasu Sharma through it.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Arjun opened the door and the old man hugged him hard. Vasu was bigger than Arjun. It was quite evident that he had worked out with a lot of vigour for many years even after retiring from the army. He could easily have been six feet four inches and more than two hundred and fifty pounds.

By no means did he fit the society's realm of understanding of how a person who runs a hospital should look like. His forearms and biceps were huge. He was large and had short and straight hair above his ears and neck. He was clean shaven and wore a pair of spectacles while reading. While not using them, they dangled around his neck and got crushed while hugging people. Maybe Maria matched Vasu in size, thought Arjun.

'Thank you so much for coming at such a short notice,' Arjun said to him while pulling out from the hug.

Vasu saw Kanaka over Arjun's shoulder and he shuffled up to her. He was in front of her after just three strides. He hugged her, far more gently than how he had hugged Arjun. Kanaka said something to Vasu which Arjun couldn't make out because he was too far away. Then Kanaka disappeared into her room to change a minute later.

The massive frame of Vasu found a comfortable spot on an armchair by the sofa. He sat with one knee folded over the other and his hands placed gently on either side. Arjun offered him a can of beer which he gladly accepted so he moved to the refrigerator and tossed a can of beer from the kitchen to Vasu. It landed not more than an inch from where he was sitting. He wrapped his fingers around it. Clicked it open and put the can to his mouth.

At that point, Maria stepped out from his room. He had changed too. He was now wearing more comfortable clothes. Dark blue denims, a grey T-Shirt and a purple sweatshirt with the hood hanging on his back, just by the base of his neck. He had maybe splashed water on his face. He glanced at the beastly figure on the couch. He then glanced at Arjun and raised his eyebrow subtly.

‘Vasu Sharma,’ the beast said. His voice was rough and deep. Just like the one someone would expect from a man his size.

‘Maria Santosh,’ said Maria and broke step for the couch.

Vasu got up and took a stride. Maria took two. They shook hands. Both men were strong and Arjun thought that the handshake was like striking one metal rod against another. Arjun knew some parts of the handshaking science. His brother in law, Rahul, was an expert in it and he claimed that he could gauge a person’s willingness to buy from him at the very start of a meeting depending on how they shook their hand. Arjun had plenty of conversations with him where he learnt about the tilt of the hand and the amount of pressure to be applied, then how to subtly check for pulse by sliding the forefinger and how to create a good impression and not give anything away.

The key to a good handshake, Arjun was told, had three parts to it. The first involved the slant of the hand which was ideally supposed to be about twenty-five degrees while taking it forward, but certainly not more than thirty. The second involved the height to which a person must raise the hand so that it would be just enough to be on top while shaking and the third and the most important was the grip of the handshake. A firm flick and then letting go of it after an appropriate time depending on the other person. Most people got the last part wrong. They either held it for too less a time which made them appear nervous or they held it for far too long which gave their power away even before the meeting began.

Arjun reckoned all the science was hurled out of the window into the grey air when the two giants shook hands. All that mattered was hearing that miniscule crunch of the bones. The one who heard it first won. Arjun was not sure who had got it right between the two, but something told him it was Vasu.

The three sat down.

Silence.

Then Maria said, ‘I’m going to try to reach the lawyer’s office.’

He took his mobile phone out of his pocket and pecked at its screen with his finger. It was five inches wide but seemed like a pager in Maria’s hands. He could hear the ring. It was a gentle purr into his ear.

No answer.

Maria shook his head and puckered his lips. Tried the home number and heard a shrilled ring this time.

First ring. Second. Third.

Then the fourth.

Then someone picked up the call.

Maria knew straightaway that it was not the lawyer because a male's voice answered.

'Good afternoon, Ms. Nikita Verma's residence,' the man said, in a well-rehearsed manner, like he was used to saying it several times in a day.

'I'm a client of Ms. Verma,' Maria said, 'I was supposed to pick up some documents from her. She was going to keep them aside for me to sign. Maybe her mobile phone doesn't have signal because I've not been able to reach it since morning. Can you please ask her if I can come and sign the papers? It is an urgent matter.'

'Ms. Verma left for Singapore last night. She would not be back until tomorrow afternoon. She must be in a meeting so maybe has turned off her mobile phone for some time.' Then he paused and said, 'May I know your name, sir? She has left with me a few envelopes. I can see if your papers are in the stack.'

Maria thought about telling the man a fake name. But he did not get a chance because he heard a piercing sound rip at the other end.

It drummed inside his ears. The sound was like that of a dart hitting the board. Crisp. Then a flash later, two more sounds resonated through the earpiece. Both were crisp and identical to the first sound. Dart and board. Then there were two soft sounds. One thud after another thump. Maria did not know what had caused the two noises at the end, but his mind was already taking a calculated guess.

But he knew the first sound. He had heard it too many times. But that did not stop him from getting a sinking sensation in his gut. His palms became sweaty.

He turned around and faced the sofa with the ajar door of the balcony behind his back. He saw Arjun and Vasu. They were gaping at him.

He said very slowly, pronouncing each word with utmost care. 'I think Nikita Verma's butler was just shot dead.'



The curtains of the balcony door fluttered ever so slightly in the lazy breeze.

The man in the blue suit called Charlie overlooked the magnificent skyline from his hotel suite. He had just finished taking a swim. He believed it kept him vigilant, something he needed at that point the most.

‘Are we still going through with our plan tomorrow?’ his secretary asked him from inside.

He turned around and walked up to her, whipping off the towel around his waist. ‘Yes, my dear. Everything will proceed according to plan. We’ve been working on this for a long time and it’s time to reap the benefits. The money will be ours and we’ll soon be out of here.’

Back in Pune, the woman who had followed Arjun from the hospital to his house, was getting restless. She knew she had to keep her nerves in control. She also knew she was good at handling pressure. She closed her eyes and meditated for ten minutes. After that, she made a sandwich for herself and booted up her laptop. She had prepared a file on Kanaka and Arjun Parekh. The latter was getting filled gradually by a person she knew very well. He had been assisting her for several weeks. He ran a private security firm in Delhi so he could circumvent laws.

Her mind moved back to Arjun Parekh as she read his file. *Is he as innocent as he claims to be? Probably not.*

She decided she would pay him a visit.

## TWENTY-NINE

Silence resounded in Maria’s house. It consumed every inch of the air. It was cold and uncomfortable. Maria looked at Vasu and then at Arjun.

‘The butler answered the phone. He told me that Nikita Verma left town yesterday evening. And then there were three shots in quick succession. All fired within a second. A silenced gun. I can say that with one hundred

percent certainty. I recognized the hushed bang.'

Arjun was the first to react. 'Where does the lawyer stay?'

'Here in Pune. About twenty minutes away in Koregaon Park. I know what you're thinking,' Maria said.

'Are we still going there?'

Maria shook his head. 'If there was anything at her place, the butler's killers would've found it. They have a huge head start.'

'Maybe we can start now and get them at the house while they are there,' Arjun said.

'Makes sense,' Vasu said. 'There is a chance that they might have escaped. But I think it is worth the chance.'

'If we must go, we need to leave now,' Arjun said. 'We have already wasted an entire valuable minute.' The three men exchanged glances.

Silence.

Then Arjun said, 'Okay, we are going.' He then looked at Maria. 'Two of us need to go. Strength lies in numbers in situations like these.'

'And someone needs to be here to look after Kanaka as well,' Vasu said. 'I'll wait. Do you guys have guns on you? Also, take my car. It's much more powerful.'

Arjun felt for his brief strap on his left side and then nodded. Maria patted his chest and said, 'All ready.'

Arjun and Maria heard Vasu secure the lock of the apartment door as they walked out with their backs to it. They skipped through the stairs and the concierge.

Arjun was not carrying his cane.

Vasu's sedan packed a punch. It had more compartments in the dash than Arjun had ever seen in a car. All were concealed with a beige coloured shiny and expensive looking plastic.

The car slid swiftly through the moist Pune streets, past other cars. Both men did not exchange even a word as they skimmed closer to Nikita Verma's house. They got all signals free and inside seventeen minutes they were a quarter of a block away from their destination. Maria swung the car inside a narrow alley, between two buildings. The sedan's doors could just

about open halfway for both to sneak out. Maria was sure that he would see scratches on the side the next time he saw the car.

For an otherwise particular man, he did not care that time. He took long strides along with Arjun in the direction of the lawyer's house.

Her house was an apartment on the sixth floor of a decent building which was painted light grey. It did not look modern, but did not appear that old either. It could have probably looked a lot better with a fresh wash of paint of some brighter tint maybe.

The building looked a lot bigger when Arjun and Maria were within ten yards from it. The entrance was embedded in large glass panels that stretched across a major area on the front side. They could see the concierge's area at a wide desk, lateral to the door of the lift.

On entering the building, they could also see two unoccupied chairs, fallen to the ground.

The two-man concierge would've posed them with a problem. But it did not, because both men were lying on the ground, in a massive pool of their blood. Both were shot multiple times all over their bodies. In their head, chest, stomach, limbs and what not.

Arjun counted, as he stood just by the entrance, what could have easily been about fifteen shells. Maria crept closer to him from behind. He said, '7 mms,' and then paused. He became confused for a flash because of what he saw next. 'There are also some 9mm shells over here.'

He then immediately took out his gun from under his overcoat and went into an alert stance. Took large strides as he broke step for the dead bodies of the security guards.

'One has been cut in the neck as well,' Maria said, as he tread closer to the two bodies.

Arjun had taken out his gun too. He held it just a shade under his eye level. He walked about ten feet behind Maria, facing the opposite direction, the elevator and the small staircase that crawled up beside it. He reckoned it must have been the fire escape because it was too narrow to be a regular stairway.

Maria called out as he went nearer to the dead security guards, 'Watch my back. And lower your aim. If the killers are here, we want them alive. Aim more towards their waists than their heads. And do not shy away from

pulling the trigger. It is clear that we aren't up against any saints.'

Arjun did as Maria said and then limped across the hallway. He stood some yards in front of the elevator door. Under ideal conditions, he would've sat on his knees to try to reduce the range of any potential shot at him. But he did not want to risk his knee.

He did the next best thing. He snuck closer to the wall with his body against it and the gun held in outstretched hands, all ready to pull the trigger. He glanced to his right and saw Maria examining the dead guards. He had already stepped into the pool of blood. He was digging for something in one of the guard's jacket pockets. He noticed that the other guard had already been searched.

Arjun's eyes juggled between the elevator, the stairway and Maria.

There was not a sound in the building. No footsteps. No mused voices.

No loud noise of the television. No echoes. No nothing.

A few seconds passed. Then a minute. And then one more.

More silence.

Maria then glanced across at Arjun, while he was still kneeling down. Arjun noticed that Maria had something in his hand when he waved it in front of his chest. He then jerked his head towards the elevator door and got up. The soles of his sturdy shoes were coated with blood and they made large red footmarks as he trudged away from the dead bodies. He beckoned with his hand for Arjun to follow him.

The two sets of footsteps echoed in the still hallway even though both Arjun and Maria were walking on their toes. It put extra pressure on Arjun's knee. Gentle streaks of pain shot upwards till his lower back. He somehow held his own. The pain was bearable, but just.

## THIRTY

On joining Maria, Arjun noticed that he had a card in his hand. Maria, then, swiped it in a slot just beside the elevator buttons. Suddenly, a small panel lit up. It showed the number six on it. Nothing more. No arrows pointing upwards or downwards.

‘Will you be able to climb the stairs?’ Maria asked in a mused whisper.

Arjun had not thought of that. He knew that even if he could somehow manage to drag himself all the way up, all his energy would be sapped by the throbs of pain that would emanate from his knee. He shook his head.

‘We will use the elevator,’ Maria said. ‘But remember this. Our backs must be against the elevator wall at all points and our guns must aim directly in front of us. Once we reach our floor, we are going to wait inside for sixty seconds. Then, if our attackers have not already shown up, you’re going to move right and cover that part of the doorway. I’ll cover the left.’ Arjun nodded his head.

Maria said as he pushed the elevator panel, ‘They could be inside the elevator right now as well. So be ready.’

A small yellow arrow popped up besides an already illuminated six. Arjun was in an alert stance with his gun, his eyes were still toggling between the staircase and the elevator panel. He saw the numbers on the display panel change swiftly from six to one. When it displayed two, he turned around fully and faced the elevator.

There was a ping. The display showed a ‘G’. Arjun’s heart was pounding. Maria had been in tense situations but even he felt the tingling in his limbs. The door started to open from the middle.

One beat. Another tick. And the door opened fully.

No one. Empty.

There was a large clear mirror inside it.

All that Arjun and Maria could see was their reflection in it. They stared ahead. Maria stepped in. Arjun shot a glance at the stairway.

‘Hold on,’ he said to Maria.

He then turned perpendicular and limped towards the staircase. He stood at the first step and craned his neck all the way up. He could see the stairs swirl up high inside the building. Silence pierced his eardrums.

He stayed there for a good ten seconds. Turned around once again and joined Maria inside the elevator. He pressed another key, this time on the panel that was inside. There was another low ping, and the elevator doors closed.

They stood close against the large mirror. Their fingers were on the trigger. Their ears were trying to pick any sound that would hint any movement. Maria’s eyes were fixed into a stare at the closed door. Arjun was looking at a small black screen that was just above the closed door. He saw the floors pass one by one.

Three. Four. Five. Six.

There was another low ping.

The elevator doors opened from the middle once again. There wasn’t any sign of movement in their limited view of the hallway. As decided, they waited. Maria continuously had one finger on a button on the inside panel to keep the doors from closing.

An entire minute passed. Nothing happened.

Arjun and Maria exchanged looks. A short but sharp stare that lasted for a flash. They then jumped out. It was like they had decided to pounce at an exact moment. They would’ve done synchronised swimmers proud because of their accuracy and swiftness.

Both the men saw nothing at either of the ends. The hallway was empty.

Then a door opened, on Arjun’s side. About three houses deeper in the hallway from where he was standing.

He and even Maria to some extent heard the key turn in the knob. Maria spun around to see what was happening. Arjun took a brisk step forward. It all happened inside a second.

Out walked a man and a lady from apartment number six hundred and seven. They were dressed elegantly. Like they were going for an art exhibition or something of a similar sophistication. The man was white and in a grey two piece suit that fit him impeccably and the lady was latte coloured and in an ankle length dress with floral patterns and a deep back. Bright colours and a bold design. Both must have been in their late twenties.

The man was closing the door so he did not see Arjun at once. But a loud shriek escaped the mouth of the lady. She subconsciously took a step forward before she had seen Arjun and his gun pointed in their direction. As she screamed her throat out, she skipped back to the man and grabbed his shoulder.

‘Get ee-n, get ee-n again. Fast honey, fast,’ the lady yelled.

The man was bewildered, but only for a second until he saw Arjun and then Maria behind him.

‘We do not have anything,’ the man cried out as he fumbled with his keys, trying his best to open the apartment door. His lady was going frenetic beside him.

‘Police!’ Arjun shouted out over the loud cries of the man and the lady. ‘Here for someone else,’ Arjun went on. ‘Please get in fast. Matter of grave importance.’

Such an actor, Maria thought.

That calmed the woman down. But only for a second. The man opened his apartment door and the two rushed inside, closing the door behind them with a loud smack.

Then Maria called out from across the hallway. ‘Quick,’ he said. ‘The neighbours and god knows who have been alerted. We need to get inside Nikita Verma’s house before anyone else comes out. It is on this side. Six hundred and ten. It must be the one at the end.’

Arjun turned around and limped towards Maria as fast as he could. He held his gun lower and closer to his body so that he could hide it quickly if anybody else came out of their apartment.

### THIRTY-ONE

Maria waited outside Nikita Verma's apartment. Arjun joined him soon. The apartment door was already open. The lock was still in place so either it must have been picked or unlocked by a highly skilled locksmith or voluntarily opened by the butler.

'Okay, a change in plan now,' Maria said to Arjun. 'Aim at their goddamn heads. We do not care if we get them alive or dead. We have to save our asses first.'

Arjun nodded and said, 'Also, the couple we bumped into in the hallway will call the police. We have to be quick.'

Maria kicked open the ajar door. The thick soles of his shoes made a loud thump against the teak wood of the door. A small red mark popped up on the door. It screeched open. Maria jumped in first. His gun was pointing ahead, right in front of him. He made quick and jerky movements, first to his right and then to his left. Arjun moved in and straggled behind Maria.

The apartment door opened just beside the kitchen that further extended into the living room. Arjun could see the large living room with a massive television screen in front of him, beyond the round dining table. Two large couches and four armchairs pointed at the television screen. All furniture was wooden. Polished dark brown and shiny. There was a massive glass panel above the television which contained various medals awarded to Nikita Verma. To its right was a door that led to a bedroom.

Arjun and Maria walked through the living towards the bedroom with their backs to each other. Their guns were raised high and their barrels aimed straight up ahead. They continued to walk back-to-back and searched the bedroom for the assassins. The room was tossed open. There were three closets, each of whose door was swung open. Their locks had been hammered out by something heavy and big. Clothes had been flung in every direction. They were scattered on the floor and Arjun and Maria had to step on them to move about in the room. The drawers by the king sized bed were also pulled out. Their contents were hurled in every possible place of the room.

They went inside the bathroom. They saw large shoe marks inside. Two pairs. Brown and moist. Stamped on every inch of the wet floor. Arjun his agent the shower curtain and peeped in.

He saw no one.



They walked out of the bedroom. Closed the door behind them. Moved rapidly back to the living room. Panned their vision. Moved it three hundred and sixty degrees to look for more doors. There was one across the television set's other side. There was another one to their right. It opened into a hallway. Arjun reckoned it led to Nikita Verma's office.

'We will take the other room first,' Maria said in a low voice.

They went around the television and stood in front of the closed door. It was made out of wood too. Solid wood. Durable. Maybe teak, maybe not. But it looked sturdy. The knob on it looked modern too. They could see their disfigured reflections on it.

Their back-to-back formation was broken when Maria stepped aside and faced the closed door. He then took a step back followed by another couple. He stared at the door like a footballer eyes the goalpost before flaming a penalty into the top left corner.

Then just like a footballer, he took a start. Brisk steps. He raised his leg high enough for it to directly hit the door, just under the knob. Over the knob would've been fine too, but it might have taken some strength off the kick.

The door did not break. But Maria was not aiming for it. He was going in for the lock which got smashed as a chunk of wood from beside the lock popped out. The door swung open slowly. They went back to their back-to-back formation and searched the room. It was in a similar state as the other room. Every visible object was displaced from its original position. A glass lamp lay smashed on the floor. Its pieces were scattered all around.

The room did not have a bath, nor the assassins that they were looking for.

Just then, there was a noise. It came from the living room. Arjun and Maria scampered out, backs to each other and guns held high.

The living room was empty but the door that led to hallway was wide open, not closed. The two rushed across and went through it. The hallway was long. There were two rooms at the end. Small and square in shape. One had a balcony, the other had four chairs and a desk. Wooden. Same polish as the one used for the living room furniture.

Both entered the room with the balcony because they had seen and heard its door close just as they had entered the hallway. They turned the

knob. It was not locked and but did not open smoothly. There was some sort of a resistance on the other side. Like someone was forcing it back. Arjun was smaller than Maria and he managed to squeeze in through a small gap. He took a blind step inside as he was trying to force himself in through eight inches. He felt his foot land on something that was not floor. It was not rock hard because his foot sank in it. But only just. Probably by an inch or so.

He was finally able to force his head inside. He panned his eyes across the room. There was no one inside it.

Then he hastily sprang away as soon as he saw what he had stepped on. It was the dead butler's arm. It lay out stretched to his side. His body, mainly his torso was blocking the door from opening. Arjun again skipped over the butler's body and went over in front of his feet. The butler was wearing leather shoes. Black and polished a week back so slightly smudged.

Arjun held the butler by his shoes and dragged him away from the door. Maria pressed forward and entered the room right away. Arjun had earlier noticed that the balcony's door was open too. He shuffled rapidly to it.

The balcony had a waist high railing. Arjun saw a knot of a jute rope on its lowermost grill. He took two strides forward and then ducked down with his body completely resting on the higher grill. He saw the top of the head of a man who was bald. He was rappelling down; his feet were perpendicular to the wall of the building. He was somewhere between the fourth and the third floor.

Then Arjun saw another man, much closer to the ground, rappelling in the same way. Both men were moving briskly.

'They are rappelling,' Arjun cried out to Maria who was still inside the room.

Then the first man jumped to ground and landed on both his feet. The second man followed suit and he too landed in an alley that was parallel to where Maria had parked the car.

The two men did not waste time looking up or gathering the rope. They darted out of the alley and then sat in a car that had been waiting for them on the road. The engine must have already been running because it zoomed as soon as they got in.

Arjun tried to register every detail of the man and the car that he

could.

## THIRTY-TWO

Maria joined Arjun in the balcony and saw the miniature figures of the two men get into a car from six levels up.

‘Holy Christ,’ Maria said. ‘They were in here the whole time.’

Arjun walked back inside. He saw that Maria was leaning forward and checking the butler’s pants and coat. Everything had been completely tossed apart. The mess had taken a backseat because of the dead body.

There was very little furniture in the room to begin with but even that had been flipped apart. Two book racks had been ripped from the wall and the books lay scattered on the floor. A wooden desk with a chair had been thrown into a corner. The computer, that Arjun reckoned must have been placed on the desk, had been ripped from its socket. Several cracks had flooded the monitor screen and the slim and sleek CPU’s back had been unscrewed. The hard drive socket was empty. They had even taken the RAM with them. The only things that remained inside were an exhaust fan, several microchips and the delicate wires that connected them.

Arjun and Maria waddled out of the room.

‘If I was in their place, I would’ve called the police as soon as I was in the car, to try to trap us in,’ Arjun said.

‘We need to be quick,’ Maria said as he peeped inside the other room in the hallway.

It was in a disarray too. The room might have been used as some sort of a records storage area because the room was loaded with boxes of papers. Some single sheets, some large stacks. All had fallen to the ground and made a large muddled heap. Not even a vestige of the tiles of the floor was visible.

‘We need to go,’ Maria said and broke step to get out of the hallway and then the apartment. But he did not hear Arjun come behind him so he turned around and saw Arjun as he went back to the room where the butler had been shot.

‘Hey there Arjun,’ Maria called out loudly.

No response.

‘We have absolutely no valid explanation to give to the police for being here. And over that I’ve three dead people’s blood all over me. We need to leave,’ Maria said. ‘What are you doing?’ No response.

Maria turned around and took a step into the hallway.

Just then, he saw Arjun emerge out of the room. He had tucked his gun back in his briefs. But he had something in his hand. He walked closer to Maria and that’s when Maria saw the telephone handset that Arjun was holding.

‘Let’s go now,’ Arjun said.

He tried to walk fast. Felt some pain shooting upwards from his knee. But it was still bearable. He walked even quicker as he followed Maria out of the apartment. The lift was already on their floor. They entered it and eighteen seconds later, they were again staring at bloodbath at the concierge’s desk. They walked past it and stepped out in the open air.

Then they heard the dreaded siren of a police car. It came from somewhere in the distance. They had maybe sixty seconds to get out of there.

They continued walking in the heavy air. Heads down and hands moving about back and forth from their torsos. The sun was still behind the dense grey of the thick clouds. It was not raining but the temperature had dropped considerably.

The siren swirled louder as the police cars crept closer. They reached the building at about the same moment as when Arjun and Maria sat in the car. Maria put it in reverse to bring it back on the main road.

‘Back to my house, right?’ he asked.

Arjun said, ‘Yes. In the meantime, I’ll try to retrieve the recently dialled numbers from Nikita Verma’s residence. Maybe something in there can help us to locate her.’

The traffic had picked up after the downpour had evanesced and they had to also stop at three of the four signals. Their progress was relatively slow and they were staring at Maria’s apartment door after about twenty-five minutes.

Vasu opened the door within seconds after they rang the doorbell. He

had already put a large jar of black coffee on the centre table in the living along with three empty cups. He must have just made it as narrow mists of pink steam were emanating from the jar's mouth. Minute beads of water sat on the jar's concave surface.

'They were still in the house when we got there,' Arjun said as he made his way up to an unoccupied armchair. He poured a cup of coffee for himself. Then he looked at Maria and Vasu and jerked his cup a tad in their direction. Maria nodded his head and pushed forward the cup in front of him. It took half a jar of coffee for Arjun and Maria to narrate all the events that had taken place at Nikita Verma's house.

Maria listened patiently and then said, 'I heard two sounds in addition to the gunshots. There was a thump of something falling down. It must have been the telephone striking the floor. Its cord must have got ripped out of the socket at the same time because the line went dead a tick after that. The second noise must have been of the butler going down on the floor.' Silence.

The three men tried to make sense of all the events. Too much had happened in too little time. Five people had been killed. All of them were innocent, maybe. Even if they had done something wrong or illegal, Arjun knew deep down that none of them deserved to die. *Not such a harsh punishment.*

'What about the lawyer?' Arjun said. 'Her life will be in danger too, right?'

Maria said, 'I'll keep trying her mobile phone. I wish we could somehow get a tracker on her mobile number. That would be a blessing. If she's indeed in Singapore for work, I can arrange for a team up there in an hour once we know her exact location.'

Vasu took a sip of the cold beer and said, 'Whatever these guys are after is of grave importance. They are getting desperate and are prepared to do anything to get it back. They are obsessed with it and probably furious at the same time for having lost it in the first place. That is a threatening combination.'

Arjun said, 'But we do not even know what they want. The same goes for who we are up and against. It could be just one person, male or female, or a full-fledged group of people.'

'It has to be a group. And an extremely powerful group. They got to

Manoj in the prison, murdered Mugdha and several other people,' Maria said.

'It is an influential group for sure but it is a small group,' Vasu said.

Arjun and Maria leaned forward along with their drinks. 'Why do you think so?' Maria asked.

'If they were a large group, then more than one person would've been sent to Kanaka's house. They are a small group. Or probably at least low on man power right now. They could be facing a problem for all we know at this stage. They might have reaches high up the ring but I really believe their numbers are not many.' More silence.

Arjun turned to Maria and said, 'Has the guy I hit with a beer can recovered from the shock?'

'Not yet. I'll get a text when he does. Also, he was unconscious for nearly twenty minutes so we do not know the extent to which his brain has been damaged. I'll get an update soon. We cannot rely too much on him though. Guys like him are often told about the risk of an arrest. Their families are given protection and financial aid in exchange for silence. So, he might not budge.'

'I keep feeling we are missing out on something. Let us rewind the affairs. What is the first thing that sparked off this chain of events?' Arjun said.

'The murder committed by Manoj Joshi and the conversation he had with Mr. XYZ on the phone six weeks ago.'

'What do we know about the murdered person?'

Maria was one of the members of the investigation team and he took pride in knowing all the facts inside out. He said, 'His name was Vijay Kamra. Worked at an audit firm. One of those big global ones. Had no known prior contact with our killer, Manoj. Though Kanaka told us that Manoj Joshi was discussing Kamra over a phone call with the same Mr. XYZ.'

Kamra has no known criminal record. He shared a healthy relationship with each of his family members. He's married with two kids who are now both in their mid-twenties.'

‘Did the kids do anything that landed their father in trouble?’

‘Both graduated in top five percent of the class. No alarms in their crime records except for one night when both were suspected to have smoked marijuana. But so were the other hundred people that were present at that party. No action was taken and all were let off with a warning. Now both hold high positions for their ages in their respective companies. The girl lives in Bangalore and the boy in Chennai. There is nothing to link the kids to their father’s death.’

‘Kamra worked at an audit firm, right? Which were the companies he was looking at when all of this happened?’ Arjun said.

‘A couple of pharmacies, an IT firm and a law firm. We have checked all of them. Like most big corporate giants, they are not one hundred percent clean per se, but we found nothing sizeable enough that would in any remote way even hint at such a bloodbath.’

Arjun rubbed his clean shaven chin with his thumb and forefinger. It was smooth and soft, not like what it was twenty four hours back when he still had a prickly stubble. He then cupped his entire face in his palms and then sent it into his dishevelled hair. ‘I’m going to go check on Kanaka and see how she’s doing,’ he said as he got up and broke step for her room. He wrapped his palm around the knob of the door and opened it gently, pushing it from the hinges, trying not to make a noise in case she was sleeping.

The room was dark and the open door brought with it a sheet of light. It was not bright, but just enough for Arjun to see outlines of everything in the room. He opened the door a bit more and some more light fell on the bed where he saw Kanaka. She was sleeping on her back, with her arms by her side. She had taken a comforter till her breasts and Arjun could see them rise and fall gradually as she breathed.

He closed the door, again very cautiously, trying his best to not make a sound. He heard the click of the latch and at the same time, almost as if on cue, the mobile phone in his pocket started ringing.



## THIRTY-THREE

Arjun had a different ringtone assigned for unknown numbers so he knew it was someone not from his contacts even without looking at the caller ID on the screen. He took it out of his pocket as he heard Maria's heavy steps come towards him in the background.

'Who is it?' Maria said urgently.

Arjun shook his head. 'I do not know.'

'Hold on, do not answer,' Maria said and then turned around and started walking away.

He hurried to his bag which he had kept on a small table by the door. He dug inside it for three seconds. In the next two, he had scampered back and was standing in front of Arjun with a modern looking device in his hand. It was of the size of a portable radio player. Matte black in colour. It had plenty of wires connected to different sockets on it and a four inch screen which was blank but lit by a dim white light. A slim and yellow wire dangled mid-air, below the device, with the other end fixed in it. Maria grasped it and inserted it in the headphones socket of the ringing mobile phone.

'Now answer it and make sure the call lasts for at least thirty seconds so that I can get a hit on the location,' he said and heaved out a heavy breath through his open mouth.

He held the device in front of Arjun's face. Its screen flashed two things. First, the time on the top right corner. It was three minutes to three. And second, in the middle of the screen, a digital stopwatch that started as soon as Arjun pressed the answer button.

It was the same man's voice as before. Charlie. It flooded in the room as the phone was put on speaker by plugging it into Maria's device.

'I've a small motivation for you,' Charlie said. An entire second passed. It would've seemed a lot more to Arjun had he not been staring at the stopwatch.

Four seconds and sixty-one milliseconds.

Charlie's barking resumed. 'The motivation will ensure that you give me what I want? Do you understand?'

Arjun ignored the question. Something was brewing in his mind. 'I'm going to email it to you instead of giving it to you physically? You know, it will save a lot of my time and effort because you certainly do not seem to deserve it.'

Charlie broke into a laugh. It was the kind of a laugh which an actor in the 60s and 70s would've had to be good at to bag the role of a villain. Charlie then said in a tone that would've otherwise been used while complementing a girl's eyes on a first date. 'Do you think I'm stupid to leave anything behind with you?'

Ten seconds and forty milliseconds.

The tone of Charlie's voice then changed again. It returned to its crude ruggedness. 'Do not play any games with me, asshole. Follow my orders. I have got your sister. You understand that? If you want to see your sister ever again. Her life is decent enough motivation now, isn't it? Back the hell off.'

A flash later, Charlie's voice was replaced by a scream that shot chills in Arjun's body. They began from the edge of his scalp and crept right up to his toes. He froze, his mouth half open. He knew that voice. His sister. He did not have a vestige of doubt. Her voice screeched again. It screamed his name this time.

Sixteen seconds and ninety-three milliseconds.

Arjun could not move. His body started shivering. Maria took a step forward and took the mobile phone.

Charlie continued to bark. 'I knew you would agree to it now. Motivation does that to you, doesn't it? Fuels the fire in the belly and the impossible starts to seem possible.' Charlie then chuckled. He said, 'And I see you're a great fan of emails, huh? Now just check the video that I'm going to send you.'

Twenty-one seconds and forty- seven milliseconds.

'You will enjoy it. We sure will,' Charlie said.

Arjun summed up courage. His hands stopped trembling. He said, 'You lay as much as your shadow on her and you will not get what you want.'

There was a spell of silence. Then Charlie hung up and the timer on

the device stopped running.

It froze at twenty-seven seconds and three milliseconds.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Arjun dragged himself up to the sofa and sat on it. His elbows were bent on his knees and his face was buried in his large palms. There was a spell of silence. The city noise rumbled in the background. All faint sounds. It was not raining.

Vasu slid close to Arjun on the sofa and he put a hand on Arjun's arched back. Maria wanted to talk to Arjun but at the same time he needed to save the phone call before it was deleted automatically by the machine. He had a margin of about two minutes before it could never be retrieved. He punched in a four digit numeric password and pressed several other buttons on the machine. He only left it alone after he heard two short beeps.

He was cursing himself in his mind for not to have sensed the danger to Jui. *It was so apparent. They had gone after the family of everyone involved.*

He ambled towards the sofa and sat on it, beside Arjun. Said, 'We are going to get her back, Arjun. I do not know how right now but we will. I'm sure.'

Arjun suddenly lifted his head from his palms. His eyes were moist and he rubbed them with the shirt he was wearing. 'They are going to pay for this,' he said. 'How dare they threaten to harm my sister? I'm going to find that bastard and teach him a lesson.'

'She has a husband, right? Even he would be in danger,' Vasu said. 'Where is he right now?'

'Yes, Rahul. I don't know where He's. He might be travelling somewhere. He does that a lot. He's in a new city every day,' Arjun said.

Maria rose from the sofa. He said, 'I'll call him right now and tell him about the threat.' He looked at Arjun. 'Are you okay with me telling him

about Jui?’ Arjun nodded but then said, ‘No, hold on. I want to talk to him.’ He tapped his phone’s screen three times and then held it against his right ear. Walked away from the living room and went into the small balcony. He came out after a spell. He had one finger on the mic of the mobile phone.

Maria took a short step towards him straightaway and said, ‘Where is he? Is he okay?’

Arjun nodded. ‘He’s not at their home, out for a meeting in Delhi. He’s fine but panic-stricken. He’s insisting that he wants to come over here and help us. I tried telling him that it is unsafe for him to travel or do anything but he would not listen. Can you think of a way I can explain the risk to him?’ Arjun said.

Maria took another step towards Arjun and said, ‘Let me talk to him.’ He took the phone from Arjun and said hello. Then did not say anything for some time, only made acknowledging sounds. Then just before hanging up, he said, ‘I think I can arrange for someone to come with you from Delhi to here. Please wait till then. Your life is in danger and we need to take certain precautions to ensure your safety.’

Maria gave Arjun back his phone and said, ‘He’s coming over. I can understand how he must be feeling. He wants to help. I also understand it is risky, but if I had told him to not come, he would’ve jumped on the next flight to Delhi all by himself. Gift wrapped and asking to be taken at literally any second. At least now, I can look after him to some extent. He will be joined by someone I can trust in Delhi. We had done a joint operation some years ago. Had busted a drugs racket in the city. He will have to chaperone Rahul. He’s a reliable bloke.’

Arjun went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. He heard Maria’s voice say, ‘Why did you tell that guy that you will email him whatever it is that they are looking for?’

‘Do you remember what he said when I asked him that?’ Arjun said, as he walked back into the living room area. He saw Maria and Vasu. Both were shaking their heads.

‘Do you want the exact words or just the gist?’ Vasu said and then glanced at Maria. ‘We have everything on tape, don’t we?’

Arjun sat on the armchair. Maria was sitting in front of him on the other armchair and Vasu was to his left on the sofa.

‘That would not be necessary because I remember what he said,’ Arjun said. ‘He had said that he’s not a fool to leave anything behind with me.’

Arjun then paused for a beat, as if he wanted that to sink in. ‘What does that tell us?’ he said. ‘Let me back up a bit. The man who had come to Kanaka’s house did not have any sort of a bag. Neither in his hands, nor in his car. His pockets were also not that large either. They would’ve barely been able to hold an average sized mobile phone and a wallet. I reckoned, that whatever it is that he wanted to take was small or foldable or both. Something that he could stash in his pocket or toss on the seat of his car. Nothing delicate that would require him to take a great deal of care. They were also rappelling down. It could have been something like some papers that had something incriminating printed on them. It could have also been something like a pen drive. They come in miniscule sizes these days. I remember seeing one the size of my thumbnail some months back in a store. The amount of data that they can store is also mammoth.’

Arjun was feeling out of breath so he halted for a flash and took a deep breath. He could see through the half open balcony door that the dark clouds had cleared to a large extent. They were not fully gone but there were other colours in the sky apart from dark grey.

He continued, ‘So when I asked him if I could email it, I wanted to know whether what he was after was a pen drive or some documents. He did not say I cannot email it and did not even ask how it would be possible. I’m thinking that he’s after a pen drive here. Or at least something that can be stored digitally.’ Arjun again paused and gauged the reaction of the two men sitting in front of him. ‘Though, we cannot completely rule out documents because nowadays people take photos of papers or scan and email them. But I believe it is a pen drive because otherwise Mahesh Bhatia would’ve at least carried an envelope or something similar. The papers deserve at least some level of shelter if five people have been killed because of it. Also, the two men at Nikita Verma’s house took the hard drive from her computer. I saw them go down, and even they weren’t carrying anything large enough.’

But little did Arjun know at the time, that he was completely wrong.

## THIRTY-FIVE

Maria and Vasu remained silent. They were thinking, trying to come up with some sort of a loophole in what Arjun had said. Arjun was pacing the floor of the living room. He went around the sofa set and the dining table and then entered and exited the kitchen to do another round of the same track.

Finally, after nearly two minutes, Maria said, 'Pen drive makes sense. But that doesn't change anything much because we still do not know where it is and what is inside it.'

Vasu sat upright on the sofa. He said, after taking a sip of his beer, 'We are going with the assumption that Mugdha had something which might have been a pen drive. She could have done three things with it. Number one, given it to Kanaka or Arjun. Number two, given it to the lawyer lady Nikita Verma. And number three, keep it with herself, somewhere safe, someplace where no one would find it.'

'And number one is not possible because it is not with us. We have got to somehow find the lawyer,' Arjun said. 'Do you think she's still alive?' He poured himself another glass of water. He had read somewhere how being hydrated helps in calming the nerves.

'We have to believe she's alright. Otherwise we have nothing much to go on,' Maria said. 'At least till we get information suggesting anything otherwise.'

Arjun took a large sip from the glass and said as he kept it down, 'Did her butler say when she would return?'

'Tomorrow afternoon,' Maria said. 'I do not know anyone in Singapore who can help us locate her either.'

'What about tracking her mobile phone?'

'I would need to take permission from the lieutenant who would want to know why we want the information. He would ask more questions whose answers we cannot reveal. He will also ask us for a vague location and we obviously cannot tell him that we have been told by her butler that she's in Singapore.'

Maria then turned and looked at Vasu. 'Can you pull some strings? Ask a friend or an acquaintance from back in the day for a favour? Or even someone who knows a guy who knows another guy? Some military thing you guys have.'

Vasu thought for a spell. 'There might be someone,' he said. 'But it has been more than ten years since I've retired. Let me think.'

Anyone could have figured out Vasu's generation gap after seeing what he did next. He did not tap on a five inch screen, but instead took out a small notepad from his shirt's pocket. The notebook was about four inches wide and an inch and a half thick. He belonged to the pre-technology take over generation. He always had a notepad and a pen handy.

He opened it from the top. The pages made a flapping sound as he leafed them using his thumb and index finger. He licked his finger tip and flipped some more pages. He browsed the notepad for the next four minutes.

'Here it is,' he said.

He leaned forward while still sitting up on the sofa. He pointed his finger to his notepad at a name scribbled in pencil.

'Abu Farooq,' he said. 'And that is his number. He has retired too. Got an honorary discharge ten months after I left. Now runs a private security firm. In Delhi, I think. He has got a large team and all now. Last I heard, he was on a huge government contract. Big money involved in that. He's the guy who can help us. He has the reach and the power to bend the rules.' 'You on good terms with him?' Maria said.

'He had offered me a partnership five years ago when he was going to start the security firm. So, yes. We are on good terms.'

'Why didn't you join him?'

'As I said, the security firm isn't in Pune. And I've everything that I want over here. My two daughters live close to me. And back at the time when I was offered the partnership, my wife was ill. I wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. I'm fulfilled from within now. Really do not need that high flying life anymore. Did my bit back in the day. I'm happy with my life now.'

'Okay, I get it,' Maria said.

'The hospital is doing well so that keeps me occupied,' Vasu said

again.

Maria glanced at Arjun.

Vasu then got up from the couch after taking a quick sip of his beer. Dialed Abu Farooq's number while crouching low and bending in his waist to peep into his notepad which was on the couch.

Vasu and Farooq must have been really good friends because there was absolutely no sort of a greeting. Vasu jumped into the reason for the call straightaway and from the looks of it, Farooq did not seem to mind.

'I need your help on something. Urgent matter,' Vasu said, calmly. He then remained silent for a spell. Made acknowledging sounds from his closed mouth. Then said, 'I want a mobile number's exact location.'

Vasu beckoned with his hand to tell him Nikita Verma's number. Maria dug his pockets for the chit that Kanaka had given him. But he was used to function in the world of technology so he had lost that chit but found the number in his mobile phone's call log. He held it in front of Vasu's face who read the number out loud.

Arjun watched and listened silently and patiently as Vasu hung up after thanking his friend.

'He said he will call as soon as he gets a location,' Vasu said, sitting down on the couch again. His hand reached for his beer can which then took it to his mouth.

'I think we should take some time off. Maybe take a breather for half an hour or so. We cannot do much but wait,' Maria said. He then turned to look at Arjun. 'I know you would feel like it will be a waste of time, but you have got to understand that your body needs the rest. You could not sleep for more than three hours last night and even though you would not agree you're tired. Your eyes are a dead giveaway. Go and sleep for half an hour, I'll come and wake you up after that or in case anything happens.' 'He's making sense,' Vasu said.

Arjun shook his head subtly but then got up from the couch a few beats later. Somewhere inside his mind a voice told him that he would need energy for a later time. Maybe that evening, or at a very short time in the future. So, he decided to take a quick nap. He broke step for the bedroom Kanaka was sleeping in.

'Keep your phone outside. I'll wake you up in case it starts ringing,'



Maria said.

Arjun followed what Maria said and left it on the dining table. He ambled his way into the bedroom, again going through the rituals of opening and closing the door with caution to not make any noise. He suddenly started feeling sleepy as he walked up to the bed and pulled a comforter up to his chest. A sleep cycle might have kicked in because he fell asleep within seconds.

Outside, in the living room, Maria offered Vasu another can of beer which Vasu refused. He too sensed that something was happening and he needed to be on top of his game if required. He flipped through the morning newspaper as Maria made some more coffee.

Silence floated in the entire house. The only noise that could be heard was of the seconds' hand of the wall clock in the living room. After some minutes, another sound took over the still silence. It came from Vasu's phone which shuddered and rotated on top of the centre table. The sound echoed and slowly drew Vasu and Maria to it.

## THIRTY-SIX

When Vasu held the mobile phone in front of his face, the screen flashed Abu Farooq's name and number. He flipped it around for Maria to see it and then turned it around once again to put it to his ear and answer it. He pressed a button to put it on speaker.

Again, there were no greetings. Abu Farooq started talking substance straightaway. His voice was clear and sounded young, like that of a thirty-five year old man. It had a sense of urgency.

'There is a problem,' Abu Farooq said and then took a pause. Maria and Vasu could hear fingers stroking the keyboard.

More silence.

Maria and Vasu exchanged glances and then looked back at the phone, as if Farooq was really standing there. It was almost as if some clairvoyant force had told them to remain quiet.

Abu Farooq said after a good ten seconds since any of them had spoken, 'I tried getting into her service provider's network but could not find a location. She must have turned off her mobile phone. Though I'm trying to find her last location while her mobile phone was still on.'

Maria and Vasu heard some more tapping on the keyboard. They did not say anything.

Silence.

'How serious is the matter?' Abu Farooq asked.

'Pretty serious. Why do you ask?' Vasu said.

'I'll have to hack into some serious servers to get her last registered location.'

Vasu and Maria again exchanged glances.

'Serious enough. Do it,' Vasu said.

'Okay, hold on.'

Some more key tapping. The three men could hear each other

breathe.

‘Can you also check if she was on a flight to Singapore from Pune late evening yesterday?’ Maria said.

‘I’ll, wait up,’ Farooq said.

There was some more sound of fingers stroking the keyboard. It stopped after half a minute and was replaced by Farooq’s voice.

‘The results are loading. And...no. She was not. No results found for a Nikita Verma on any flight to Singapore yesterday.’

‘What about a flight to any other city? Can you look for that?’ Vasu said, leaning forward as he spoke.

Farooq made an acknowledging sound and said after several seconds, ‘Okay, I’ve found something interesting over here. She had booked a ticket to Kolkata last night but she never boarded the flight. She was also supposed to fly to Hyderabad today morning at eight ten. But guess what? She did not board that flight either. Though I can see here that she has booked a ticket from Hyderabad to Pune for tomorrow evening at eleven.’ ‘Any activity on her credit card?’ Maria said.

‘I checked that already. Nothing there as well.’

It must have been overcast or raining in Delhi because Vasu and Maria heard the clouds crackle just before Farooq hung up.

At that moment, Arjun emerged from his bedroom door. He was not rubbing his eyes nor was he doing things which people who have just got up usually do. He went straight to the sink and splashed water on his face. He could smell the coffee that was brewing in the kitchen. He saw the final few drops trickle down into a jar from the machine’s nozzle.

Maria raised a cup mid-air and beckoned to Arjun to ask if he wanted some. Arjun nodded. He sat by the dining table and checked his mobile phone straightaway.

Vasu told Arjun about Abu Farooq’s phone call while Maria brought a large cup of coffee with half milk and sugar for Arjun.

‘Seems too much of a coincidence, doesn’t it?’ Arjun said. ‘Our lawyer lady goes completely off the radar with such a mystery around her exactly before her butler, a client and his wife are killed. And also, the concierges of her damn building.’

Maria adjusted his chair slightly by changing the direction in which it was pointing while still sitting so that he could face Arjun and see Vasu at the same time. He took a sip of his coffee and said, 'Something must have tipped off the lawyer.'

'Or someone' Arjun said.

He then paused as he brought his coffee cup closer to his mouth and tilted it slightly and took another sip. He kept it back on a thin wooden coaster and glanced at his mobile phone to check the time. It was half past four.

He said, 'The lawyer left yesterday evening, so she has been gone for nearly eighteen hours now. She could be anywhere, halfway across the world, lodged in some small hotel in some corner where you don't need to flash an ID to get a room. She made sure she doesn't leave behind a trace. And she might be the only person who knows what is on that pen drive, or if at all is a pen drive.'

Arjun got up, lifted his coffee cup and broke step for the balcony. He plucked out a cigarette from the pack as he walked out. Thumbed the lighter and sucked on the cigarette. Exhaled the smoke after entering the balcony. He placed the cup on the thicker part of the railing.

It was still cold, even though the weather had cleared. He looked over the street and took deep breaths as he tried to calm himself down.

That is when something strange happened.

From the balcony of Maria's second floor apartment, he saw a modern looking black sedan pull over tight along the sidewalk, just outside the building's vestibule. He heard the tyres' hiss on the wet concrete of the road. The car would not have caught his interest had it not been for the woman who got out of the car.

He had seen her somewhere.

The face was too familiar.

From two floors up, Arjun could make out that she was slightly older than him, at probably thirty-five years. She was tall and ultra-fit. Her height might have been five feet ten inches. She had a prominent jaw line and dark brown hair which was tied into a bun. She was dressed in all black.

The woman stood still by her car for a few seconds. She checked her

phone and adjusted the collar of the trench coat that she was wearing. Then she started walking. Small steps, fast pace. A lot of urgency. Then she disappeared into the entrance of their building.

That's when it struck Arjun. It was the same woman who was staring at him at the bus stop late last evening.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

Arjun dropped his cigarette on the floor and stamped on it with his foot. Rushed indoors by swaying through the curtains. *Damning hell, she's coming up. Has she been following me since yesterday?*

'Buckle up, fellows,' Arjun said. 'We are soon going to hear a knock on the door. It will be a brunette woman,' Arjun said. 'Where are our guns?'

Vasu and Maria exchanged looks to see if either one of them had a vestige of what Arjun was talking about. Both got up, together.

'Our lawyer lady?' Vasu said as he bent down to feel for his ankles over his trousers.

'No,' Arjun said. 'I mean I do not know. I had seen this woman yesterday at the bus stop when I was on my way home. I thought she had recognized me as the lead from Sensed, so I didn't think much about it. It keeps happening every now and then, so I let it go. But just right now I saw the same woman get out of a car, meters away from our building. She might be on her way up now.'

'I feel for the concierge right now,' Maria said.

Vasu was quick to squirt in. 'That guy is as light as the strand of hair in the men's room. Anyone with intent can blow him away. We saw what happened to the security men at the lawyer's building.'

The concierge may have been crumpled or he may not have been but the doorbell of Maria's apartment certainly rang.

The three men had expected something similar to happen, but their body still turned stiff for a flash.

Vasu was the first to move. He pulled up the right side of his trousers. Sent a hand down to remove his gun from an ankle holster. He held it in the air and pointed it in the direction of the door. He sat on his knees, using the couch's backrest as a shield. In a Matter of two seconds, he was all set to pull the trigger if required.

Almost at the same time, Maria removed his gun from a chest holster. He trotted across the living room. His hands were in an alert mode with the

gun aimed at the door. He took long steps and moved on his toes. Positioned himself beside the hinges of the door and waited.

Arjun took a beat longer to get into a stance as he pulled out the Glock 17 he had taken from Mahesh Bhatia. He used Vasu's idea and knelt behind the dining table, to use it as a shield. Held the gun with one palm under its butt and the other hand's finger on the trigger.

The men exchanged glances. They raised their brows first. Then their heads bobbed.

With utmost caution, Maria stretched across the closed door. He wrapped his palm around the self-locking latch and turned it slowly. Then he hurled himself beside the hinges of the door once again. He was still holding the latch so he dragged the door along with him.

The woman must have been trained because she summed up the situation inside a picosecond and raised her arms. She was not carrying any weapons but she had something in her right hand. Something dark blue, something like a notepad. Vasu had the best view and he subtly moved his head sideways to give Maria a hint that there was no danger at that instance at least. He also reckoned that her right must be her preferred hand and if she was carrying any weapon, it would be hauled somewhere on her left side. He checked every inch of it by ducking just enough over the back of the couch. His eyes searched for bulges, but they could not find any.

The woman took a step forward, her arms still raised high. She was tall so she ducked slightly, by crouching from her waist and bending a bit in her knees, as she moved inside through the open door. She was taking small steps, just like a minute ago when Arjun had seen from the balcony.

'Do not move,' Arjun called out.

But she did the exact opposite. She lowered her right hand and waved whatever it was that was she holding with it.

'Indian Intelligence,' she said with a calm assurance. She paused just for a second and fixed a stare on Vasu. Continued walking. Continued talking. 'Special Agent, Kavya Nag. Economic Offences Division, CBI.'

Arjun got up half way, still behind the dining table. He was not convinced that the woman was an agent. Neither were Vasu and Maria.

She sensed their obscurity. She took another step and said, 'Okay, I'm

going to stop here, and gently toss my ID over to you. Check it for yourself. I'm going to do it on the count of three and then again going to raise my arms high up in the air. I'm declaring right now that I've a weapon on me, in my left butt pocket. I do not intent to use it at all.'

Kavya counted three and heaved her ID across the living room. It landed some inches in front on Arjun. At that exact moment, Maria from behind the door flung himself towards Kavya. Grabbed both her hands and brought them down laterally. He made another quick move and he clasped her hands together behind her back, parallel to the ground.

He said, 'Move even a bit and I'll break your shoulders. A very easy thing to do from this position. An exaggerated push upwards and you will hear two snaps of the shoulders crunching.'

Kavya was unfazed. She possessed a kind of calmness that shouted out loud that she was not in that sort of a situation for the first time. She said, 'Measure your words, man. I can have you locked up in a cell for assaulting an intelligence agent. Maybe also for carrying that Government Issue gun.'

There was silence as Arjun examined the badge. He saw 'Government of

India; written in golden on the jacket. He flipped it open to see Kavya's photo. It might have been taken five to six years ago but she still looked pretty much the same. Her hair was still jet black, there were no wrinkles on her face and her eyes were still alive. If anything, he noticed that she might have lost some weight and built up some more muscle. He reckoned Vasu or Maria would be better judges to check the authenticity of the badge. He tossed it over to Vasu and again went into an alert stance with his gun.

Vasu examined the batch. He pressed the outer part of the jacket with his thumb and index finger and felt the paper. He then opened it and did the same for the only page inside. He felt his finger slide on the thin and glossy film of plastic. He looked at Maria, nodded his head and then sent a text message to Abu Farooq asking him to check Agent Kavya's credentials.

Silence.

Farooq replied as fast as a sixteen year old in love. Vasu read it in his mind: Trust her. We are doing business together. I had just picked up my phone to call to you that she was coming.



Vasu stared for a second at his mobile phone's screen. That was the last thing he had expected. He nodded his head and said out loud, 'She checks out just fine.'

'Happy now?' Kavya said, trying to set her arms free from Maria's firm grip.

He let go off her. She then turned around to face him. Her right hand reached for the lower reaches of her trench coat. But that was just a bluff to throw Maria off-track. He thought she was reaching for her gun. Instead she went around him. Quick hands. Swift feet. She held his torso and then quickly changed her grip to put one arm around his neck. Then the other hand made itself into a fist and was ready to launch itself to shatter the cartilage of Maria's left ear. She held that pose, in the air, inches away from his ear.

She did not hit him. Maria was big and a hard man to pin down. But Kavya knew that technique always triumphed physical strength. She had him fully in control and could have sent him to the ground but she held her moves for a better time.

Arjun and Vasu lunged a step closer and then halted even quicker than they had started when Kavya screamed 'Wait' at the top of her voice into Maria's ear. He felt as if his drums had burst open. The high pitch of her voice thudded the chambers inside.

Then she whispered into Maria's ear, stressing on each letter, 'Do not ever do that to me ever again.' She let go off him.

He was shaken. He held his stomach with one hand and his ear with the other. 'Are you crazy?' he murmured. The words were barely audible.

She did not bother to respond. She had made her point.

Arjun and Vasu were baffled. Some silent seconds passed. Arjun asked Kavya to have a seat on the couch and then went across the kitchen up to Maria who was still in some pain. Arjun dug in his pant pocket and took out two strips of tablets. Popped one pill from a strip and put it on his palm.

'Here,' Arjun said. 'They are painkillers. I've been using them for the past month. They are mighty effective.'

Maria downed the pill along with water.

'Let us all calm down here,' Vasu said, as he sat beside Kavya on the

couch. He then pivoted from his waist to face her. ‘And do not ever do that to any of my men again. Are we clear on that?’ He paused for a beat and then cleared his throat. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘would you like a beer or some coffee?’

## THIRTY-EIGHT

The three men and the woman were sitting in the living room. Arjun and Maria had settled on armchairs and Vasu and Kavya were on the couch.

‘Why are you here?’ Maria said, facing Kavya.

‘You had asked for Nikita Verma’s records sometime back. That set off alarms at the place where I work,’ Kavya said in cold and dry tone.

‘Why would alarms go off at the Economic Offences Division when we searched for a simple lawyer?’

‘First tell me why did you want her records?’

‘This is not going to work like this, miss,’ Maria squirted in. ‘this is a two-waystreet.’

Vasu said, ‘First things first. How did you find us? And why were you following Arjun yesterday evening?’

Kavya crossed her legs. They were fine and slender, just like the rest of her of body. She said, ‘I’m not supposed to tell anyone. It is a covert mission. Only three people know about it. I need to be assured that I can trust all of you. So, can you please tell me why you were looking for Nikita Verma’s records?’ Her tone had become friendly.

Arjun and Maria exchanged glances. Maria was wearing his poker face, but then he nodded his head subtly, or at least Arjun thought he did.

‘You have got to understand my predicament,’ Kavya said.

Arjun thought about his sister. Time was ticking away. The voice of her scream played in his mind. Every second lost meant a second less he would’ve to get her back safe. He reckoned they could not get into larger trouble. If anything, whatever Kavya tells them will add to their understanding of the proceedings. No loss.

‘Okay so here it goes,’ he said. ‘We are in a massive hole ourselves and we think that Nikita Verma may know something that can get us out of it. We need to find her to get ourselves out of this problem but she seems to have disappeared.’

‘When did you last speak to her?’

‘We haven’t yet. We do not even know how she looks for that Matter.’

‘How do you then know that she will get you out of this problem?’

Arjun lost it at that point. He got up rapidly. One quick motion. His temper flared in the chill of the air. ‘I’m going to say this for the first and the last time. You better tell us why you have been following me since yesterday or get out of the house because you have not given us anything of value so far. I’ve a sister whose goddamn life is on the line and if I do not act fast then she might not see another day.’

‘Wait, what sister?’ Kavya said instinctively but then realised the next instant that she had done the exact opposite of what Arjun wanted her to do. She paused but then quickly said, ‘I’ll tell you,’ and then her eyes panned the room as if they were double checking if there was anyone else inside. ‘Are we alone?’ she said.

‘We have got a friend over. She’s inside in one of the rooms, sleeping,’ Vasu said.

Arjun trotted across and peeped into Kanaka’s room. She was asleep. Her chest rose and fell steadily and periodically, just like it was the last time he checked. He turned to Vasu and said in a low voice, ‘How is Kanaka still asleep after all this commotion?’

Vasu looked at him. ‘I’m sorry, but I gave her half a tablet of Xanax. She needed some sleep and in no way was she going to go to bed with everything that was happening around her. I had to do it.’

Arjun returned to the living room and started pacing the floor.

‘How long will she be out?’ Kavya said, craning her head up to look at Vasu as he sat on the armchair.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I gave her only half a pill so she will be awake in three hours.

Maybe four at the most.’

‘Is she okay? I mean can we trust her?’

Arjun and Vasu, said, ‘Yes,’ almost in unison.

‘Okay,’ Kavya said and then went quiet for a brief spell. ‘I’ve been in Pune for the past month on an assignment. It is completely off the books.

Only a friend here, the stop chief of my site back in Delhi and Abu Farooq know about it. At the beginning Farooq helped by giving me an alias and the paperwork that goes along with it. The director of my unit introduced me to this operation and we are working on it together. I'm his contact on ground and he's giving tactical inputs from Delhi. The friend here is an informant of our department who told the director about this operation in the first place.'

Kavya paused and faced Maria. 'I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot, but my throat would not mind some coffee right now. It is already sore because of this sudden change in the weather. Can you make some please?' Maria got up without saying anything and went to the kitchen.

'Who's the third person you're talking about?' Arjun asked.

Kavya stayed quiet for a beat and then said, 'Vijay Kamra.'

## THIRTY-NINE

Kavya continued in her muzzled voice as Maria prepared coffee behind her. 'My operation was thrown off track a week ago when Vijay Kamra was killed. He was a key asset, in fact the only asset that I had. The two of us were supposed to meet in the evening on the day he was killed. He was going to give me some evidence on the entire operation.'

Maria called out from the kitchen, 'But we checked his schedule. He was going to meet his wife for an early dinner.'

'He could have done that with ease because our meeting was not going to last for more than ten seconds. In fact, it was just supposed to be an exchange. He was going to toss a bag which had the evidence, at a place which we had decided beforehand. I was going to go and pick it up, roll down the window of my car and take the package. He was going to drive away after that. That was going to be the entire meeting. Less than ten seconds.'

'How did he end up becoming your number one asset?' Arjun said, as he got up from the armchair and started pacing the living room floor.

'He was an informant of the department. Had been for the past many years. He worked at an audit firm and thus had access to thousands of details that could show a pattern of fraud. He had been of great use to us. We had worked together on several cases before, big and small. We trusted him completely.'

'What was the evidence that Kamra had and who was it against?' Arjun said, as he stopped pacing the floor and sat on the armchair.

'I'm not sure about that. I mean, we have a list of suspects and the evidence could have been against any person in that list. As for what the evidence was, it was a stack of papers. Two briefcases, both related to the same case.'

'How long is the list of suspects?'

She hesitated a flash but then said, 'Three people. Two foreigners. One Indian.'

'And what kind of a crime are you looking at?' Vasu asked. He

leaned forward, closer to Kavya like a fly is pulled towards a light.

‘Not exactly a crime as such, but a fraud.’ Kavya paused and then said after taking a long breath, ‘Do you know what corporate espionage is?’ Her eyes sparkled like that of a Math professor while discussing a problem of calculus.

Arjun nodded and said, ‘It involves giving a company’s trade secrets and other confidential information to a rival, right?’

Kavya bobbed her head. ‘Yes, but what we are dealing with here is something even bigger. We are looking at companies and firms that are funded and supported by the Indian Government to manufacture and do research and development of weapons that can be used by all sorts of special units of the army, navy and air force. And not only that, but these firms do top level work which is extremely pivotal to the technological advancement of India, not just for defence purposes but also for the country’s financial well-being. The company which is under our scanner goes by the name of Greenwich Tech.’

‘Why do you suspect Greenwich? I mean, there must have been some trigger, right, for you to start looking at them?’ Arjun said.

Maria emerged from the kitchen, with a tray in his hand that had two glass jars. One of them, the larger one, had black coffee and the smaller had milk. The tray also held three cups and a bowl which had cubes of sugar in it. He placed the entire assembly on the centre table and sat on the armchair he was previously sitting on.

Kavya thanked Maria and flashed him a smile. Poured herself a cup full of coffee. Black with no sugar. She took a sip and said, ‘A Chinese Company called Fit Pharma recently launched two products back in China that were still in R&D at Greenwich. The tests at Greenwich were in their final stage and were undergoing some mandatory checks before being released to the market.’ ‘What were the products?’ Maria asked.

‘They were pills against head ache and nausea during pregnancy. Big value.’ ‘Yes, especially in China,’ Arjun said.

Kavya had been in a serious and a strictly no nonsense mind set since coming, but even she managed to smile. She placed her cup on a thin and round wooden coaster and went on. ‘The authorities at Greenwich became aware of a possible leak as soon as their pills hit the Chinese market. They

identified a few potential points of leaks. They were also contemplating to lodge an official complaint with the police and file a civil suit. But then at round about at the same time, they were asked to develop certain medicines and first aid equipment that could be used by our armed forces. Bagging a government contract is like getting to the top of Mount Everest for all these firms because of the money and prestige involved. Even the smaller contracts easily run into billions. Plus, because it is a long term contract, the balance sheets are taken care of with relative ease. And also, it is not the worst thing to be in the good books of the policy makers.'

Kavya then leaned forward. She said, 'If Greenwich had lodged a complaint of an alleged corporate espionage at that time, then they would've been permanently blacklisted and their chances of ever acquiring a government contract would've been reduced to zero. They remained silent. But then another Chinese firm, a sister company of Fit Pharma which deals with arms manufacturing, started doing R&D in the same technology as the one Greenwich was working on. Some board of directors of Greenwich brought the stop chief of my unit in Delhi into play. The members of the board did not want the quality of their product nor the security of India to be compromised. They wanted the entire matter to be kept under the carpet because no one knew who all were involved and they did want to be embarrassed. A few days after that, I was brought into the loop by my stop chief.'

'Is the reputation of a firm more important than national security?' Vasu asked.

Kavya shook her head. She remained silent for a spell as her mind wandered somewhere. Then she said in a really low voice that barely reached any of the men. 'Remember what I had said when you asked how long our list of suspects is? I said one Indian. You know who that is?'

She took another long pause and said in an even lower voice, 'The current

Union Textile Minister who will probably run for Prime Minister – Mr. Kailash Saxena.'



## Boom Baby

### FORTY

The clock in Maria's living room made a crisp ding-dong sound at exactly five thirty. It had filled the silence that had ensued after a long monologue by Kavya. She took some more sips of her hot coffee. It was soothing to her throat, especially in the chilly air.

'You suspect the damn Prime Ministerial candidate for economic espionage?' Maria said.

'He isn't the candidate yet and suspect is the key word over here. We are not sure,' Kavya said calmly, again giving the impression that it was not the first time she was in this sort of a scenario.

'Why do you suspect him?'

'Several things. To begin with he has had access to several companies that have been booked for economic espionage. No questions asked. But if I play devil's advocate myself, he has been in touch with hundreds of global firms. But then it gets interesting. Four years ago, a majority of his funding for his campaign came from a sister company of Fit Pharma called Lotus Company. It is one hundred percent Indian and has not gone public yet. Its profits have increased ten times since then. Also, Fit Pharma had absolutely no connection with Kailash Saxena before they funded his campaign for state elections. As you would've noticed, all the evidence is circumstantial and fits like a perfect sized underwear but nothing would hold in a court of law and we'll look like fools. He may seem innocent if viewed from a different perspective.'

Kavya then gauged the reactions of the three men. She said, 'Now getting back to what I was saying before. After I was brought in to investigate off the records, we started digging.'

As a part of our preliminary investigation, we looked at the common people involved in the development of both the pills and the arms. That

narrowed our focus on seventeen people. We searched their medical, phone and email logs with the help of Abu Farooq and came across something interesting. Fifteen people in that list checked out just fine. We did not find anything suspicious on the remaining two, in fact we hardly got anything on those two. But all of their internet and mobile registries and logs were encrypted by state of the art security. It was too sophisticated. What piqued our suspicion even more was that both used the same level and type of encryption.

At that point, we put the two under surveillance. They were extremely conservative in their lifestyle. Nothing extravagant and nothing that would raise even one eyebrow. But I've to admit that we were modest in our surveillance of the two employees because we did not want to alert them or their handlers in any manner, however remote. We could follow their physical movements and actions only to a certain extent and not as we would've otherwise done. Also, their personal laptops and mobile phones were a nightmare to crack even for someone of the quality of Farooq's firm.'

Arjun had lots of questions swirling in his mind. He said, 'Who are the two employees and do you know anything about their handlers?'

Kavya had done her homework well. She could recite every fact of the case chronologically backwards. 'The handlers are mostly based out of Mugdha but we cannot say anything with one hundred percent guarantee,' she said. 'As for the employees, both are immigrants. One is a Chinese male of thirty-seven and the other is a Russian male of forty. Both are yet to get citizenships of India but have been working here for the past three years.'

Kavya paused to catch her breath. She inhaled deeply and said, 'The surveillance at first revealed nothing, as I had said before. But then nine days later, we got a breakthrough when Farooq could retrieve some phone call logs of the two men. Through that, we learnt that they had made a string of calls to numbers registered on Chinese and Singaporean mobile networks.'

'Did both make calls to the same number?' Arjun asked.

Kavya bobbed her head once again. 'Yes,' she said. 'One number in China and one in Singapore. Upon some more digging, we found that the numbers belonged to a subsidiary of Fit Pharma, the company that had used Greenwich's tablet formula.'

'How did they so blatantly copy Greenwich?' Vasu said.

‘Simple techniques. Tweak some relatively unimportant components of the tablet without changing its final effect. So maybe change a quantity of one ingredient by decimals or use a decent substitute. In short, do just enough for the pill to be a tad different from the competitor’s product. Pharmacies do it all the time when they say a more effective version of a medicine has come out. The difference here is that the composition of a totally new tablet which is revolutionary in its own way was leaked to a foreign firm.’

Maria poured coffee for himself. He had made enough for it to last throughout the evening, provided Arjun did not start drinking it. Maria said, after placing his cup on a coaster, ‘Since you have established a connection between the two employees and Fit Pharma, why can’t you just detain them temporarily. Maybe bring them in for interrogation?’

‘The proof is not strong enough. In this age where multinational corporates have such a big say in how the world functions because of economic repercussions, no court will ever grant a full-fledged inquiry upon only giving telephone records as proof. It is way too circumstantial. Also, we have acquired the records illegally. All we are left with is getting more proof in a legal way. But if we get something illegally and it is incriminating enough, we can ask for some favours. My stop chief and I know a couple of district attorneys who will be willing to hear us out. But the evidence, as I said, has to absolutely nail the guilty.’

Kavya then panned her vision across the three men. Her eyes fixed into a stare at Arjun. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘can you please tell me why you wanted Nikita Verma’s records?’

‘Last two questions. Why were you following me yesterday evening?’ Arjun said.

Kavya cleared her throat and then said, ‘You were the person who had appeared out of nowhere and met with the wife of the person who had just killed my number one source. I had anyways hit a roadblock and had to somehow get a grip on things. I was doing everything possible to find a new lead. That’s why I had been following Mugdha Joshi. Then she left and I had a choice to either go after her or to stay with you and that girl and see what you guys do. I had seen the girl several times before with Mugdha and had also done several background checks on her and I had realized that she was as useless as the wisdom tooth. I decided to follow you. But then, when I sort of confronted you, your body language did not suggest that you were nervous

about anything. And believe me, even the best criminal displays signs of tension. Especially when someone around them acts in an odd manner. You did not seem to be bothered by any of that. I decided to let you be on your own. But just to cover all ends, I put a tracking device on your bag so I that I could watchyou.'

'What the hell?' Arjun said.

He had opened his mouth to say something but then Kavya went on. 'Come on, it is not a big deal. I was really desperate to get any kind of information that I could work on.'

Arjun shook his head gently, still in disbelief.

'You said you had two questions,' Kavya said.

'Yes,' he said and then paused for a beat. 'You said alarms went off when Nikita Verma's was searched for. Why?'

'We had identified two persons who were involved in the act of espionage and then Manoj became the third after the police arrested him for Kamra's murder. It was obvious that he was involved in some manner as he killed Kamra minutes before I was supposed to meet him. I figured he would share some details with his lawyer so I put a virtual bug on her. So, I got an alert every time she did anything. She bought a burger and my phone beeped. She boarded a bus and my phone beeped. You get the point, right? So,when someone started looking for her phone call and credit card records, alarms started ringing wildly.'

Arjun nodded. 'And Abu Farooq told you about us?'

'You said two questions. That was the third.'

'Let's just assume that I'm bad at Math.'

Kavya was not impressed. 'Both yes and no,' she said. 'Farooq had set up such a system that I would be directly alerted if there was a hit on Nikita Verma. When you asked for her records, my phone went off and then I called Farooq. He directed me here using the location of Vasu's mobile phone.'

She then fixed her eyes on Vasu. 'Farooq regards you highly. It was evident from the way he spoke about you. He normally doesn't praise someone that quickly. He said your friendship went back in the day and he would bet that you would not even step on an ant. There was conviction in

his voice and I believed him. That is the reason I came here knowing that I could safely keep my gun tucked into my holster.'

'You're surely breaking all possible ethical codes, aren't you?' Vasu said. 'Till today I could have said that Farooq was not the one to break any laws by tracking people. He lived by the book in the army days and was not even tempted to make any violation.'

'People change. And we are doing this for a good cause. We are trying to get a bunch of rascals behind bars for putting the security of this incredible nation in jeopardy. We are doing the responsible act here and not the other way around. Stop giving me a lecture on the ethics crap,' Kavya said and then put her coffee mug down on the centre table in front of her with a thud. Vasu knew he had hit a nerve. He did not respond.

Arjun changed the topic. 'How badly does such corporate espionage affect the country's economic performance?'

Kavya got up. 'The CBI estimates that it results in losses of over a billion dollars every year in India alone. The organisation we're dealing with accounts for more than seventy percent of that. It is backed by huge corporates and if Union Minister Saxena is involved, his political campaign will be funded by all such giant corporates giving him virtually unlimited power. If he becomes the PM, the losses will go up exponentially. The economy will eat itself and no one would now. In short it would go boom, baby.'

## FORTY-ONE

Silence.

‘Now,’ Kavya said. ‘Tell me why the three of you wanted to know about Nikita Verma.’

Arjun exchanged glances with Maria and Vasu. He noticed their heads bob. He then recited the entire proceedings since that day’s morning. He talked about the man who came to Kanaka’s house, the phone call that he had received where he was asked to return something, then their suspicion of Mugdha maybe giving something to Kanaka or Nikita Verma, the phone call with Nikita Verma’s butler and then abduction of his sister.

‘Hold on. You did not bother to tell me earlier about your sister?’ Kavya said. She got up from the couch and went over to the dining table. She picked something up from its surface and asked, ‘Is this your phone?’

She saw Arjun nod and then did some tapping on its screen. ‘Pin?’ she said. ‘One two three four.’

The phone unlocked after Kavya punched in the numbers. ‘Come here, fast,’ she said.

Arjun got up. ‘Is he calling again?’ he said urgently and ran towards Kavya.

Maria and Vasu and looked on and wondered what was happening.

‘No,’ Kavya said. ‘But you’re going to call that guy yourself.’

She paused as Arjun looked over her shoulder at his phone’s screen. She continued, ‘You need to tell him that you have both the briefcases. You also need to tell him that he needs to stop threatening you if he wants either of them.’

‘But he will harm my sister. And I do not even have what he wants.’

‘Yet. We don’t have what he wants yet. But we will soon. We will find a way. But right now, our priority is to save and rescue your sister. We can only focus on retrieving the lost evidence later. We first need to get back your sister.

What’s her name?’

‘Jui,’ Maria said.

Arjun nodded. He felt his fingertips go numb. He rubbed them against each other and then against the side of his trousers.

‘When you talk to him now, you have to assert yourself. Let him know that you’re the one who will be in charge from now on. You must say everything with utter conviction. Tell him that you will only hand over what he wants if he releases your sister. Give him a time and place.’

Kavya paused for a spell. She put a hand on Arjun’s back. ‘You will be able to pull it off. I know it.’

Arjun again nodded his head, this time extremely subtly. Kavya was concerned about him but he needed to get the job done. She continued from where she had halted. Said, ‘Tell him to be there with your sister.’

‘Where should we ask him to come?’ Maria said. He had completely pivoted on the armchair and was facing the dining table where Arjun and Kavya were standing.

‘It cannot be too far from here,’ Kavya said. ‘Are there any quiet and open places within a radius of about three blocks from here?’

Maria said, ‘What time are we looking at?’

Kavya flicked her wrist to check her watch. It was three minutes past six. ‘At ten PM maybe? It will give us time to prep and hunt for the briefcases.’

‘Jui was mostly taken from Kolkata. That’s more than four hours away. What if Charlie says he needs more time?’ Arjun said.

‘We reschedule then. But only by a few hours. We have to give ourselves a goal in terms of time.’ Kavya paused, panned her vision across the room and then said, ‘Let us give ourselves till four in the morning. We have to get Jui back here safely before that.’

Kavya turned and looked at Maria. She raised her slender brows.

‘How about some park?’ Maria said. ‘It will be silent and far from the lay man’s eye just in case things and tempers get out of control.’

‘I reckon they would not shoot in public with people around. Simply because that would create a big scene and it would land up in the media. They are involved in acts which have the potential to compromise the nation’s security so they would not want the extra attention. Are there any

quiet alleys or narrow roads somewhere nearby?’

‘Do you have any specific requirements of a particular vantage point?’

‘Yes, ideally I would. But we do not have the luxury backup teams. So, nothing specific apart from a narrow road or alley which is relatively quiet.’ ‘Why are you so keen on a narrow road?’ Vasu said.

‘A narrow road will limit the number of entry and exit points into that area. We can have some control that way.’

‘There are several places nearby which can fill those requirements,’ Maria said, ‘But I suggest we go for the outskirts. There are no high rise buildings in the vicinity. That way even they cannot have any snipers on top.’

Arjun listened to every word with utmost attention. He said, ‘When I call him right now, I’ll only tell him the time and would not mention any specific place.’

Kavya nodded. She held Arjun’s mobile phone in front of him. ‘You just have to press the green key on the screen once. I’ve already dialled the number.’

Arjun took the phone from Kavya. He was confident of their plan. He somehow felt that he could trust her. He liked her no nonsense approach. Ever since she had walked through the front door, she had been to the point. There was a sense of urgency about her that had infused vigour in him.

He pressed the green key on the screen and three beats later, he heard the gentle periodic purr of the phone ringing.



## Captain Sourabh

### FORTY-TWO

The call was not answered till the eighth ring.

‘I sincerely hope you’re calling for the sake of your sister,’ voice said. It was someone else, not Charlie. This voice was younger and much deeper.

‘I’m prepared to give you what you want. There are two things, right?’ Arjun said. ‘I’ll give you both the briefcases for Jui’s safe release.’

‘I do not negotiate. You have...’

Arjun cut in. ‘Then you can forget about them.’

There was silence on the line. The man had not expected the change in Arjun’s stance. He was tense during the previous call. He thought he was going to feed on his anxiety.

Arjun continued. ‘The exchange will happen four hours from now, at thirty minutes past eleven. In Pune. You better get your ass over here.’

‘Stop telling me what to do and how things are going to happen. You listen to me here...’

Kavya beckoned with her hand. Arjun interjected once more. ‘You need me. You need what I’ve. And you’re not going to get anything unless you follow what I say.’

‘You bloody bastard. You will never see you sister again if you threaten me even one more time.’

‘And you will never get the evidence that can implicate you for the rest of your goddamn life if you even as much as lay a finger on her. Do as I say. Eleven thirty. Pune. You will receive a call twenty minutes before to be informed of the exact place. Don’t dare to call me before that.’ The man across the line did not respond. Arjun hung up.

Kavya made a thumbs up sign with both her hands and a smile hung

on her face. 'That was impressive,' she said.

Arjun heaved a sigh of relief and blew out a large volume of air from his mouth. Kavya took a step in Arjun's direction and hugged him tightly like soccer players after scoring a goal.

'They will look for more leverage over us,' Arjun said.

'That's right,' Kavya said. 'Any one of you has wives, girlfriends, parents or kids?'

'My parents are in Delhi,' Arjun said.

'I'll try to see if anyone I know there can go over and check on them,' Kavya said and looked away from Arjun. 'What about the two of you?'

Maria shook his head. Vasu said, 'Two daughters. Both are in Pune.'

'You have got to ensure their safety. Because from what I've realized from my investigation till now is that these guys are dangerous and are receiving assistance from influential people. They have a strong tech team in place too. In all likelihood, they would know where we are and how many of us are here. And after our little stunt to gain control right now, they'll try to regain the upper hand. Nothing would work better than having more hostages. As I had said before, we need to ensure our loved ones are safe and away from even a shade of danger.'

Arjun then fixed his stare on Vasu. 'I think you should ask your daughters to stay with you at least for tonight.'

Vasu thought about it for a spell and then made an acknowledging sound. 'Will you be okay if I leave?'

'One hundred percent. Don't worry about that. We have enough man power here. Also, Rahul is coming too. Go look back to your daughters,' Arjun said.

'Keep me in the loop of what is happening and do not shy away from asking for any more help,' Vasu said as he rose from the couch. He walked towards Arjun and hugged him tight. 'I'm feeling as if I'm letting you down by going like this,' he said to Arjun.

'Do not. In fact, you're tying a potentially loose end that can come and haunt us later. Thank you, Vasu. I'll see you soon.'

Vasu nodded and pulled on his sweat shirt that hung on a stand by the

door. 'Yes indeed,' he said. 'We never celebrated your discharge. We will have two reasons when we celebrate now.'

He flicked his wrist at Maria and Kavya and then closed the door behind him. Silence filled Maria's living room. Not for the first time, not for the last. Arjun poured coffee into three cups from the jar on the centre table. Gently pushed one each towards Maria and Kavya and then wrapped his fingers around one for himself. Sat on the armchair and lit a cigarette. It was the last one in the pack.

'Do you want to take a breather for ten minutes so that our minds will be refreshed?' Kavya said as she broke step for the couch to sit down.

'Absolutely not,' Arjun said.

'Exactly what I was thinking. I thought you guys might have wanted to take a small break.'

'So, what is the plan?' Maria said. 'We have given them a time and promised something that they want in return for Jui. We do not have that something. Neither do we know where to find it.'

'Nikita Verma, the lawyer. She may have it,' Kavya said.

'There is also a possibility that Mugdha or Manoj, any of them or both of them together may have hidden it somewhere,' Maria said.

'Which option seems more likely?' Kavya said. 'We have to play the numbers.'

Arjun responded quickly. He said, 'If Manoj or Mugdha had it with them, then they would've tried to use it as leverage for Manoj's release.'

'We do not even know how much Mugdha knew about Manoj's activities, let alone if she was aware of the existence of anything he had with him that would implicate his handlers,' Maria said.

Arjun sat up straight on the armchair. His fists were joined in front of his closed eyes. He was summing up all the events that had happened since the previous evening. Snapshots of every person he met skimmed across his mind. He was trying his best and using every bit of what he could work with. Snippets of all the conversations he had had, played in his mind. One after the other.

*Think. When something has happened and it doesn't make sense, then some information is missing.*

Kavya and Maria were looking on. They too tried to make sense of the events. Tried to find the missing links that would help them come up with something of value. Then Arjun opened his eyes suddenly. He was breathing steadily and could feel his breath on his knuckles as he exhaled. He had remembered something from a conversation he had with Kanaka the previous evening.

‘Mugdha had the evidence with her,’ he said.

Silence.

He leaned forward. His closed fists were still joined in front of his mouth. He said, ‘The two of you know that I had met Mugdha yesterday, right? I was with Kanaka for some more time after that. After Mugdha left, I remember talking to Kanaka about the level of equanimity that Mugdha possessed. I admired her strength then. Thought I could learn something from her. But when I look at it now with respect to everything that has happened since then, I think she was unperturbed because she knew that Manoj was going to be fine. She knew deep down that all of it was going to go away. She knew he was going to be freed soon. She must have had the evidence. She was preparing in her mind to hand it over.’

Kavya and Maria had their eyes fixed on Arjun.

More silence.

Then Kavya made an acknowledging sound.

‘You see it fits perfectly,’ Arjun said. ‘Manoj was arrested just a few hours before we met Mugdha. It was a short time relatively speaking but a long enough period for Mugdha to think of her next move. She must have pondered over it right from the moment her husband was arrested.’

‘Maybe she must have thought about even before that,’ Kavya said, leaning forward too. Her elbows rested on her thighs. ‘The investigation was into its eighth day, right? The police had also made several visits to the Joshi house as well as conducted two or three interrogation sessions with Manoj. So, he would’ve known that they were creeping closer on his scent. He would’ve started feeling the jitters. What does a criminal do when he knows the police are homing in fast?’

‘Try to get out of that place and disappear somewhere? Or worst case and if you have the necessary resources, go to some country that has not signed an extradition deal with India?’ Arjun said.

‘But we were all ready and prepared to tail him anywhere he went,’ Maria said. ‘We had two squads in place for just that. We had eyes on him twenty-fourseven, day or night. But he did not make any move. He stayed inside his house. He only came out once, that too right at the beginning of the week.’ ‘To do what?’ Kavya asked.

‘He was out with his dog. They took a stroll around the park and came back home half an hour later.’

‘Were you watching him then? And did he meet anyone while he was outside? It might have been anything, like helping an elderly person get his or her stick, saying hello to a kid or even being all chivalrous while treating a woman. Anything like that or something on similar lines?’

‘No. Nothing. He neither looked at anyone nor did he talk to any person.’

Kavya sent a hand through her silky hair. Tucked some astray strands from her face behind her ears and then looked at Arjun.

‘That further strengthens my point,’ he said. ‘Manoj had the evidence which he took from Kamra after killing him. He must have had to give it to his handlers but then he was under the scanner after becoming the prime suspect. As you said, Maria, you guys had him pinned down at all times. Two teams you said, so the chances of sneaking the evidence out or someone coming to take it must have been slim.’

Arjun lifted his cup and sipped on his coffee. He said, ‘What better time to smuggle the evidence out after getting arrested? No one would’ve had eyes on Mugdha or her house.’

Kavya cut in. ‘Also,’ she said, ‘He wouldn’t have wanted to give the evidence to his handlers because he would’ve been aware that it can be used as a leverage with them and a bargaining chip with the police if things get out of hand.’

‘Exactly,’ Arjun said. He got up, feeling excited. It was the first time since he had been pulled into this entire scandal that things had started to make sense.

‘He would’ve tried his best to hide the two briefcases. He would’ve also told Mugdha about it at about the same time. He would’ve told Mugdha where they were and asked her to turn them in case he was arrested.’

‘So why didn’t she go to the police right away? Why the wait?’ Maria said as he stroked his stubble with his hand.

‘Manoj and Mugdha must have thought through the entire process. They would’ve planned every step,’ Arjun said. ‘In fact, I really believe that Manoj would’ve told Mugdha what all things to do if he was arrested. A detailed plan with all the steps. Listed as clearly as procedures are on a manual of electric gadgets these days. He could also have made a list of people to whom Mugdha could have gone to with the proof. At least I would’ve done it that way. And he had an entire week to take the necessary steps to put everything in place. He did not step out but he had access to the internet and his phone all the time. He could have marshalled his troops and formulated a plan. Eight days is a lot of time.’

‘Okay I get it,’ Maria said. ‘But why did Mugdha spend time with you and Kanaka that same evening? Why wasn’t she running around the place to give the evidence that would save her husband’s burning ass?’

‘Maybe she had already started the process,’ Kavya said.

‘But that still doesn’t make sense. Why would she spend time sitting in a café and not do everything that she could?’

Arjun sat upright again. He rubbed his eyes with his palm. ‘She met her lawyer before meeting us,’ he said. ‘Mugdha went straight to her after Manoj had been arrested. Then she met us around eight in the evening.’ ‘We arrested Manoj at five thirty,’ Maria said.

‘She must’ve been with her lawyer for about an hour if we subtract the time she would’ve taken to go to Nikita Verma’s office and come back to her house.’

‘More than that if she had taken the bus,’ Maria said. ‘Or if Nikita Verma had come over somewhere nearby. Maybe that was the part of the plan. To go to the lawyer and tell her the entire story of the evidence which can be exchanged for Manoj’s release.’

‘That is too much of a risk. They must have talked to the lawyer before. Swooped her into the entire game,’ Arjun said as he stopped walking around and settled on the armchair.

‘Why not just call her? Or even text or WhatsApp telling her to start the process to form a negotiation deal. Mugdha could have easily done that,’ Maria said.

‘Maybe she did,’ Kavya said. ‘She would’ve had the briefcases with her in a safe or someplace secure. She and Manoj would’ve decided to hand it over only if things got out of hand. Till then, they would’ve had it in their possession. Remember what we had discussed earlier about using it as leverage against both the handlers and the police?’

‘We searched the Joshi house but did not find anything,’ Maria said. ‘They would’ve stashed the evidence somewhere else, outside their house. We would’ve found it had it been inside their house.’

‘So, she must have met her lawyer in the evening to tell her something about the evidence. But then the lawyer vanished right after she met Mugdha,’ Maria said.

‘Mugdha must have told her about the risk involved in the entire operation. She would not have turned her phone off otherwise. Same goes for her credit card,’ Kavya said.

Arjun said, ‘I don’t think that Mugdha went to meet Nikita Verma. Too much risk involved in that. Because if we can deduce that the evidence was being used to strike a deal, then Manoj’s handlers would have guessed it too. Manoj was not an idiot to carry it with him to the police stop, so it would’ve been clear that Mugdha would’ve it and try to hand it over to the concerned person. No rocket science there.’

He saw Kavya and Maria’s heads bob.

He said, ‘I believe that Nikita Verma came somewhere halfway to meet Mugdha.’

Then Arjun took a pause and turned around to look towards the door of Kanaka’s room. He saw it open gently. No creaking sounds.

## FORTY-THREE

Arjun saw Kanaka amble out. Her eyes were heavy and her hair had gone messy. Her clothes were slightly crumpled as well. After taking a couple of steps, she stood still, just beyond the frame of the door. Her hands hung motionlessly by her side. She was squinting her eyes while she was

getting used to the light outside.

Arjun rose from his armchair and shuffled rapidly towards Kanaka. She took a step forward as he leaned in close to hug her. He gently rubbed her back as he pulled her closer.

‘How are you holding up?’ he whispered.

Kanaka’s green gaze rose to meet his eyes. She whispered too. ‘Much better. I think I needed the sleep.’ She then paused for a beat as she shot a glance towards Maria and then fixed her stare on Kavya. Said, ‘Who is she? And where is Vasu?’

‘Boom! Magic. He turned into a lady. Isn’t that obvious?’ Maria said, pointing at Kavya Nag.

Kanaka glared at him, but he was looking elsewhere.

Arjun wanted to tell Kanaka everything that had happened. He was already feeling partly responsible for Vasu giving her a sleeping pill. He was also feeling guilty for accidentally texting her instead of Maria earlier in the day. He had made up his mind to tell her everything even before she had got up.

He glanced at the clock in the living room and saw that it was seven thirty. Four more hours to go. *Just four.*

He asked Kanaka to sit on the armchair that he had occupied and then brought her a cup of coffee. He pulled a chair from the dining table and dragged it to the living room.

‘Vasu left. He had to go home to his daughters,’ Arjun said. He flicked his hand in Kavya’s direction. ‘And this here is...’

Kavya interjected. She got up half way by pushing the cushion of the sofa. She was tall and her hand easily stretched across the centre table for a handshake. ‘Kavya Nag,’ she said. ‘CBI, Economic Offences Division. I was looking forward to meet you.’

Kanaka got up halfway as well and accepted her hand. They exchanged polite smiles.

‘Why did Vasu leave?’ Kanaka said, glancing first at Arjun and then at Maria.

Kavya reckoned that Arjun was at loggerheads on whether he should tell Kanaka anything or stay silent. She entertained that thought as well



mainly because she knew that Arjun would not be able to think clearly with Kanaka sitting beside him as he would not have been in control of his emotions.

Kavya was good at briefings. She was aware of it. She knew that she could keep it short. She took it upon herself to tell Kanaka what all had happened after she had slept. She gave herself three minutes to explain everything. *Challenge accepted.*

She looked at the clock on the wall in front of her. It was exactly ten seconds past seven thirty when she said, 'I'm going to keep it short. Here it goes,' Kavya said. She finished at thirty-two minutes and forty-five seconds past seven. She was proud of her effort. She told Kanaka about everything from the butler's death to their deductions about Mugdha and Nikita Verma's whereabouts.

Kanaka turned to look at Arjun and then said, 'Why do you think Mugdha and Nikita Verma met halfway?'

Arjun was not expecting any kind of a response from Kanaka but she surprised him, not for the last time. It took him a few blinks to gather his thoughts.

'Right,' he said. 'Simply because Mugdha would not have travelled that long with the evidence on her. Very risky. I also believe that she would've been careful while giving it to Nikita Verma. She would've at least tried to knock off anyone who was on her trail.'

Arjun turned to look at Kavya. He said, 'How would you have selected a place for giving the briefcases to Nikita Verma?'

'Mugdha would not have thought it through to that level of detail,' Maria said. 'Even if she did, she did not possess the skills to think like a trained operative.'

'But we have got to keep in mind that, or rather consider that Mugdha had planned the entire thing with Manoj. And Manoj was a cold blooded killer and spy. He knew how to plan. He must have chosen the place and he must have been cautious about it,' Arjun said.

More silence.

Kavya said, 'definitely a crowded place. No doubt. Also, not too far from the house because Mugdha would want to get to it as soon as possible

after Manoj's arrest. Close to the bus stop because they would've considered Nikita Verma's security as well.'

'What about the Joshi house itself?' Arjun asked.

Kavya thought about it for a blink. She said, 'Then the evidence would've to be at the house. The police would've found it while searching.'

'They had to meet near the bus stop. There would be a lot of people there. Especially around six in the evening. I'm a fan of public places and public transport in such situations. Much safer. No one likes to take out the gun with people around. It is also easier to lose any person who is on your trail,' Kavya said. 'As you asked, I would've done it that way. I do not know for sure how Manoj and Mugdha must have planned it.'

'What if Mugdha did not have the evidence?' Arjun said.

'What do you mean?' Kavya asked.

'While leaving, she told us that she was going to meet Nikita Verma once more. If she had handed over the evidence, why meet her once again?' Arjun said. He saw Kanaka's head bob from the corner of his eye.

'To follow up maybe? I do not know,' Kavya said.

'We need to trace Mugdha's steps after she left the café,' Arjun said.

'Do you mean to say that she still had the evidence on her when she was with you guys?' Maria asked.

'Yes and no. She knew where it was. But did not have it with her at that point,' Arjun said.

Maria felt his mobile phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out to see a new text message. He read it in his mind and then said out loud, 'Some good news. Rahul has arrived in Pune. My friend who is with him just texted me.'

'They will be here in thirty minutes.'

'How much does that friend of yours know about any of what has happened?' Kavya said.

Maria replied, 'Not a thing. I just asked him to chaperone Rahul till my house. He doesn't know why I asked him for a favour. He's not even going to stay. Will drop Rahul and leave.' Kavya nodded.

‘I think,’ Arjun said, ‘We are looking at this the wrong way.’

The man in the blue suit called Charlie had to change his plan. Which was not a problem because he had escape routes ready in case of emergency. The only thing that bothered him was Arjun Parekh. He had come from nowhere, right out of thin air and had somehow managed to make him worry. He had even handled Kavya Nag well. *That bitch.* And now this man had turned up. He needed to be silenced. He had been entertained for too long.

Charlie meant business when he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He pushed his specs up his nose and called someone who he knew would kill Arjun Parekh.

## FORTY-FOUR

‘What do you mean?’ Maria spurted.

‘We are looking at Mugdha’s murder, Nikita Verma’s disappearance and my sister’s abduction with respect to the suspicion of corporate espionage.’ Arjun paused and said, ‘Which is not wrong as such, but if we continue like this it will lead to circular conversations because even though each incident is threaded by a common string, all of them happened separately at different times and places. I think we should look at each as a standalone instance. How would we have otherwise looked at a murder, a disappearance and an abduction?’

He looked at Kanaka who was at his left elbow. He asked her, ‘Are you going to be fine?’

She nodded her head and then said, ‘Yes.’

Arjun pulled his chair closer to where Kanaka was sitting and held her by the hand. He pressed it gently as he looked into her eyes and managed half a smile.

He then panned his vision from left to right. From Maria to Kavya.

‘You are experts when it comes to that, aren’t you?’ he said. ‘You have both had your share of each of those types of cases. How did you go about them? Let us start with Mugdha’s murder.’

Maria spoke first. ‘We will first find out where she was murdered. Then do an analysis of the crime scene. Look for eyewitnesses. Try to establish a timeline before the estimated time of the murder. Talk to the people she met in the days leading up to her death. Then talk to the people in her close circle as well as at the place where she works. At the same time, do a history on

Mugdha to see if she was involved in anything that would get her killed.’

‘She was found near Pashan Road, right?’ Arjun said, as images of the morning flashed in his mind.

‘Yes. That was the crime scene. There was too much blood there for it to not be. Plus, we also found bullet shells there. The forensic expert gave a ballpark position of where the shooter must have been standing, his height and similar stuff.’

Kavya raised her brows and said, ‘Which was?’

‘The shooter must have stood about twenty-five feet from Mugdha and his or her height would’ve been five ten, ten and half feet,’ Maria said. ‘Coming to the next line of action, my subordinates have talked to several people at the place where Mugdha worked. She was a receptionist at a dentist. She had called in sick five days ago, saying that she had tremendous mental fatigue.’

Arjun nodded. ‘We need to look at the events that led to her murder,’ he said. ‘What is the estimated time of death?’

‘Five in the morning.’

‘She was with us till eight-thirty,’ Arjun said.

‘I was supposed to meet her later in the night,’ Kanaka said. ‘But I could not reach her mobile phone when I had called. Nevertheless, I decided to go to her house and see if she was still awake.’ Kanaka paused. Took a deep breath and said, ‘She was not there when I reached her house. It was locked and dark inside. I waited for fifteen minutes. Tried her mobile phone again. Same result as before. Then I left, thinking she was with her lawyer. Then I got a call just before five in the morning from a hospital telling me

about her.'

'Can we get a hit on her cell phone's last registered location?' Maria said.

'I'll tell Farooq to get us that,' Kavya said.

'How would you guys investigate an abduction?' Arjun said.

'A similar process,' Kavya said. 'In the case of your sister, we know the reason for abduction. The call for ransom has been made and the place for exchange has also been decided. Any law enforcement agency would've run a parallel investigation to find where the victim was taken. We would've traced the victim's steps, try to locate the abduction point and so on.'

'We would need to go to Kolkata to trace her movements,' Maria said. 'And we do not have that much time.'

Silence played in the room as no one spoke. The sun had fully set and Arjun could see several lights turned on in the building adjacent to theirs. The rain had brought a chill to the air in the day. Arjun buttoned up his jacket and walked towards the balcony to shut its door. He turned the latch to secure the lock and sat on his chair once again. He noticed that Kanaka had slipped into a sweater. The same white one that she was wearing the previous evening.

'We don't need to go to Kolkata,' Arjun said. He heaved a heavy breath into his cupped hands. Warm air. And then rubbed the two together in front of his face. 'We have called them here, haven't we? They need to make it from there to here. It took me about two days to drive from Kolkata to Pune the only time I tried doing that. I got their call at four in the afternoon to tell me about Jui. They would've kidnapped her maybe thirty minutes to one hour before that, right?'

Kavya nodded. She said, 'Yes, they would've first ensured that she's firmly in a lock down and then called you.'

'And when I called them to give them a time, they did not ask for an extension. That means one of two things. They can arrange for her to be in Pune in four hours or she's already here.'

'They would need to travel by air to cover that much distance,' Kavya said.

'Exactly,' Arjun said, getting up from his chair once again. 'Putting Jui on a commercial plane can blow up their entire operation. Too much risk.'

They would not have been able to carry any weapons inside the craft. And we have Rahul with us. Safe and secure. They would not have any leverage as such to blackmail. Private plane seems likely. The most likely. And as I said before, we are playing numbers here.'

Kavya joined in. She said, 'What if they are already in Pune?'

'Even then they would've used a private plane at some point,' Arjun said. He walked around in the living room, manoeuvring himself around the furniture. He said, 'and however influential a person you might be, you need to go through certain motions to use airspace. National safety regulations ask for that. Especially after 26/11. The Air Traffic Control would go nuts if they saw an unidentified airplane on their radar. You might be the goddamn Governor or the mogul of the biggest industry in the country but you still have got to notify the authorities.'

'And that would show up on the records,' Kavya said. 'And we have Farooq who can dig for almost any kind of information we want.'

'Many planes would've taken off from Kolkata today. How do we find out which one had Jui?' Maria said, looking at Arjun.

'I'm going to ask you guys again. How would you have done it?' Arjun said.

Kavya went first this time. She coughed. A coarse sound. Then she said, 'I wouldn't want anything that attracts attention. An aircraft will draw eyeballs of course, but I would personally go for something that is small, not that modern and has the capacity to carry three people along with one pilot.'

Maria nodded. 'Maybe a single engine plane. It would be powerful enough to propel someone over six hundred kilometres.'

'And what about airstrips? You would go for something that is relatively less known and has low traffic, right?' Arjun said.

'Yes,' Kavya said. 'I would've selected an airstrip that is as inconspicuous as it can get. I would've possibly drugged Jui to keep her from revolting.'

Arjun stopped pacing around. His hand scratched his chin gently. He stood directly in front of Maria and said, 'Bring your map out. We are going to browse the area airfield by airfield and look at the potential routes they would've taken.'

‘I’ll have to search for it. We will use my iPad instead,’ Maria said.

‘No...no. I need a physical map to work with. I cannot function well with maps on screen.’

‘No wonder you’re friends with Vasu,’ Maria said as he got up and headed for his room. Its door was opposite to where Kanaka had been sleeping.

Arjun said as he turned around to face Kavya, ‘Call Farooq and ask him to give us a list of all charter planes that have taken off from Kolkata for Pune in the last six hours. Ask him to include any flight which is scheduled for the same path in the next four hours in the list as well. Also, tell him to give us the names of the persons in whose name it is registered and information about the pilot.’

‘On it,’ Kavya said as she tapped the screen of her mobile phone.

## FORTY-FIVE

The clock struck eight soon after Maria found two maps of India, one political and one physical. He brought both to the living room. They had been tucked away somewhere deep in one of the closets in which he used to dump things he no longer needed. The only reason he had kept them was because he thought of them as a representation of what the world once was. Emotional connection and all that.

On squandering out to the living room, he saw that Arjun had already cleared the dining table for the map to be spread out. He beckoned with his hand for Maria to spread out the map on the surface of the dining table. Kanaka watched quietly. She had taken a seat at the head of the dining table which was just in front of the closed door of the balcony. Kavya was in the kitchen, on the phone with Abu Farooq. She was leaning forward on the sink, with her weight on her arms.

Air traffic was categorized under the red banner of highly sensitive data and hence Farooq needed to do much more than stroke his keyboard and

see the results pop on his computer's screen. He asked Kavya to stay on line several times as he made calls to people who would help him get inside the desired server. She could hear dabbled voices across the line. Majority of the talking was done by Farooq but she could hear two or maybe even three other people. They mostly gave one phrase answers followed by long monologues by Abu Farooq.

Arjun started studying the map with Maria by his left elbow, without Kavya. She joined them some blinks later. The three leaned on the dining table, with their necks craning down. Arjun's index finger hovered over the map, touching it occasionally but only for a flash after which it started hovering over it again. Kanaka too leaned forward from where she was sitting.

‘Where do Jui and Rahul stay in Kolkata?’ Kavya said.

‘Near the Howrah Bridge. They can see it from their window,’ Arjun said.

Kavya said, ‘They would not need a proper runway if they were using a single engine aircraft. They can take off from dirt as well. All they would need is about three thousand five hundred feet of clear land. Finding that small a piece of land wouldn't be a problem. They could have easily drove out of town, hit the countryside and took off from there. But still they would've had to be close to an airfield because the plane must have been on an airfield before taking off. Maybe within a kilometre from the field.’

‘That are still a lot of potential take off points,’ Arjun said. ‘It would be impossible for us to pick any one. It would depend on where Jui had been hauled before they put her on a plane. For all you know, they might have put her in a large farmhouse or something like that, which could have done a hanger's job.’

Kavya said, ‘Also, they can land anywhere once they reach here. There are lots of potential landing spots as well. All they need to do is find a place to lodge the plane for some hours until they are safely away from that site.’

‘OK, so tracking them on land is not possible. What about while they are in the air?’ Arjun asked.

‘It would show up on a radar, right?’ Maria said. ‘Abu Farooq is tracking that as we are speaking, isn't he?’



‘There is a chance that they would’ve turned off the transponder after being airborne. Or they might not even have turned it on in the first place,’ Kavya said. ‘All of this is highly illegitimate so they would not mind breaking another law or two.’

‘No, but turning the transponder off would be life threatening. It would be as dangerous as driving at night with the headlamps turned off on the Pune Mumbai Expressway. And believe me, but there is a lot more traffic in the air than on some of our roads and highways,’ Arjun said. ‘Especially on the route that all these commercial passenger and cargo flights take to go from Pune to anywhere east. Turning off the transponder will be suicidal. No sane person, however desperate, would ever do it on that route.’

Kavya said, ‘They can fly at a low altitude with the transponder off. All these big aircrafts are usually twenty thousand plus feet. In fact, a little higher than that, more like around twenty-five thousand feet. Whereas a single engine aircraft would not go that high. Its engine would not allow it to go further than ten thousand, and that too is an outer limit.’

Then she stopped talking because her phone started ringing. ‘Abu Farooq’s calling,’ she said as she pulled it out from her pocket and put it on speaker straightaway.

His voice flooded the apartment. ‘Okay so, I’ve looked at different airstrips,’ he said, ‘Small, medium and big ones, in and around Kolkata. There are about twenty which could have been used for taking off. In the timeline you mentioned, five private planes took off from various airstrips. Single engine was your only criteria, right? Three of those five flew people of Fortune 500 companies. The other two involved people flying for leisure. Some bachelor party or something. Both are men. They reached Pune about an hour ago, about five minutes apart. One of the three CEOs is still airborne. The other two reached two different but private airstrips round about the time you had first called.’

‘Do we have eyewitness accounts who can give us any information about the occupants on any of the five flights?’ Kavya said.

‘No. But we have verified log entries. Not impossible to tweak, but not an easy task either,’ Farooq said.

‘That doesn’t tell us much, does it?’ Maria said.

Kavya leaned in closer and bent from her waist. Her elbows now

rested on the surface of the table. She cleared her throat before she said, 'Is there any way we could track a plane whose transponder has been turned off?'

A blink later, Arjun walked away from the dining table. He trudged towards the living room. 'Hey Farooq,' he cried out. 'Are there any primary radars on the route that we are looking at? If yes, can you get access to them? The primary radars do not rely on transponder or any other external factors for that matter.'

The excitement in Farooq's voice suddenly went up. 'I'll have to check. Some military bases still use them for detecting,' he said. 'Since they are military related, I would've to get a legit pass to search their data. Give me some more time. I would need to contact my single point of contact in the government. It is a lady who coordinates my activities with the government. She's an intelligent woman and will help me no doubt.'

The two men and the two women settled on the chairs around the dining table after Farooq hung up. They looked at each other. A stillness had taken over the house. All of them could hear each other breathe.

'How in the world did you know about primary radars?' Maria said, turning and then glancing at Arjun.

'I had done a course in aviation some time back. Needed to acquire some practical knowledge to do a couple of episodes for a television show. My trainer was this incredibly enthusiastic bloke. He was sixty-five but still full of energy. It was one of the most thrilling ten day blocks of my life. Flew a plane after it took off and then listened to hundreds of tales that my trainer told me. He flew commercial airlines until not much before.'

Fifteen minutes later, Kavya's phone began buzzing again. It was kept on the dining table and it rotated on its surface as everyone looked and leaned towards it like a two year old towards an ice-cream cart.

## FORTY-SIX

Kavya again put the phone call on speaker.

Abu Farooq's voice filled in the apartment once more. 'Okay so,' he said. 'There are several primary radars in the area. It has been a hot airspace after 26/11. I cancelled out all the commercial aircrafts in the air by using their take-off and landing times. I found something interesting after that. The primary radar indicated that six private planes have been airborne since the past four hours. Not five, as the initial log of the secondary radar had shown.'

Abu Farooq then paused and took a deep breath which could be heard across the line. The sound echoed in the apartment. He continued, 'So that means that one of the six planes has turned off its transponder because it could not be detected on the secondary radar.'

Arjun and Kavya exchanged looks and nodded. Arjun said, 'Where was it detected? Is it still airborne?'

Farooq said, 'I've not been able to locate the plane throughout its journey. The signals have been on and off. I first got a hit on it about fifteen kilometres east of Kolkata.'

'What was the time then?' Maria asked.

'That was about seventy-five minutes back,' Farooq said. 'I've got three more hits on the plane's location after that.'

Arjun and company then heard Farooq stroke his keyboard as well as click his computer's mouse several times.

'I'll come straight to the last hit that I got. The plane's location flashed for several minutes before vanishing again. It was approximately fifty nautical miles north of Pune. It is an unusual land to be over if you're trying to go to Pune from the east coast. You would normally just fly through straight without deviating much from your path.'

'Is the terrain more even on the route that they have taken?' Kavya said.

‘Yes, more even. Relatively flat as well,’ Farooq replied.

Arjun joined in. He said, ‘Makes sense. By flying low, they would stay undetected for most of the time.’

‘Also, there would’ve been less air traffic on that route,’ Maria said.

‘That’s right,’ Farooq said. ‘Only three planes have taken a relatively same route in the last month. But all of them had their transponder turned on. And in all probability, it was the same plane on all three occasions as the day and time of passing through that area was the same. Maybe an enthusiast flying for leisure.’

‘At what time was it fifty knots from Pune?’ Arjun asked.

Farooq must have had the entire information in front of him because his response was quick. He did not take even a vestige of time to search for anything. He said, ‘Roughly fifteen minutes back, maybe fourteen. I cannot give an exact number with a primary radar’s data.’

‘Can you give us a vague current location going by its pattern of flying?’ Arjun said.

‘That would not be possible. I mean the pilot can sway the plane in any damn way. He doesn’t even need an airstrip for landing so monitoring airstrips also will not help. But I can tell you one thing. You can fill fuel in a plane only up to a certain point. Just like in cars. Flights also have a mileage. Also, again just like cars, they have an optimum speed at which the mileage is most efficient. If you exceed or go under that speed limit, the fuel efficiency will be reduced by as much as ten percent depending on the degree of breach. Going by the speed at which the plane we are observing is going, by considering the distance it has travelled against time it has taken, it is going far faster than the optimum efficiency speed. I would’ve been able to tell you the efficiency and the litres of fuel left in the plane’s tank had we known the exact make and model of the engine. But we can safely assume that it is a single engine aircraft because of its speed. It is going too slow for anything more powerful. Its speed till now has been at the outer level of a single engine.’

‘But by the estimates of an average single engine plane, when do you think it will run out of fuel?’ Arjun asked.

‘Anytime now. Maybe ten more minutes. Or twelve. Certainly not more than that. If I was the pilot I would be scanning for potential landing spots right now if I hadn’t landed already.’

Arjun said, ‘So you would go higher, right? So that your scope of vision is a lot more or to recce the land for a potential landing spot. Maybe that’s our chance. They will go higher and show up on the radar.’

‘There is a possibility of that happening. Pune is an Air Force base so there are two radars covering the airspace of Pune City and its periphery. I’m looking at both of them. Nothing has popped up so far. Keep your phone on loud and with you because I’ll call if I see anything that looks even remotely like the airplane we are looking for.’

## FORTY-SEVEN

Outside, the only natural light emanated from the moon. The clouds had scattered but only just.

Kanaka walked over to Arjun and stood beside him. 'I'm sorry I had to drag you into this,' she said to him.

Arjun held her by the waist and pulled her closer. He gently massaged her back and said, 'Don't say that, dear.'

She leaned to her side and hugged him tight. Buried her head in his chest. She could sniff a faint whiff of the cologne that he had sprayed in the morning. He wrapped his arms around her and patted the back of her head.

'I'm sorry,' she said again, whispering it this time.

Arjun had craned his neck down by a fraction to look at Kanaka but he saw Kavya and Maria walk towards the living room from the corner of his vision. Maria patted Arjun's back as he passed him.

Kanaka pulled Arjun out from the hug. The tears in her eyes made them glint in the artificial light of the tube light. He said, 'I'm proud of the way you have handled things so far. I'm sure we can get out of this.'

He made an acknowledging sound as Kanaka held his hand and squeezed it ever so silkily and then walked up to the unoccupied armchair. Arjun waddled to the dining table and picked up the spread out map.

He walked back into the living room with the map, open in his hands. He then spread it out on the centre table. It was too small and the map's sides drooped down at the edges. He smoothed a bulge from the middle and then tried to straighten the corners to check if they were stiff enough to hold their own. They stayed upright for a flash but then drooped down once more. Arjun took a deep breath, exhaled and then said, 'We have told them to come to Pune. Our meeting is in less than four hours. We must try to figure out where they would want to land.'

Kavya and Maria exchanged glances and then looked at the map. Arjun and Kanaka eyed their every movement keenly in silence that was broken by Kavya when she said, 'Not possible to point a location as such. They could land anywhere. But I would land somewhere around west of

Loni. Then put my hostage in a car and drive down. That way I can be in Pune city in an hour before the meeting.'

'You're right,' Arjun said. 'It would not be possible to get their exact location. And there are acres of open lands to the west of Pune. They could touch down anywhere without raising even a vestige of doubt. It is absolutely tailor made for that kind of stuff. But we somehow must find and get Jui back even before our meeting begins. Because later, when they find we have made them, they will surely be pissed.'

At that moment, a landline in Maria's house started ringing. It was nailed to the wall by the door and Maria had to walk all the way up to it. It was a small phone, red in colour, with a coiled cord that had keys on the receiver. Old school. It stopped ringing when Maria put it to his ear. 'Thanks, that is not a problem. Send him up,' he said and then replaced the receiver.

He said as he opened the front door, 'That was the concierge. Rahul is here.'

Arjun rose from his chair and walked up to Maria's right elbow. Some beats later, they heard footsteps which became heavy. They did not slow down. In fact, they became brisker and louder. Finally, from the staircase, Rahul reached the corridor. He was breathing heavily, partly because of the dart up the stairs and partly because of the anxiety that had swamped his system.

Rahul had been to Maria's house before, twice. For Christmas and New Year celebrations for the last two years. He hurried up to the door of his house where he saw Arjun standing beside Maria. Arjun broke step towards Rahul. They met each other in the corridor, a few feet outside Maria's door.

Arjun knew right away that Rahul was feeling extremely anxious because he tightly hugged him. Rahul never fully expressed his emotions. Whether happy or upset, he always wore a balanced face. His lips only arched slightly and his voice rarely changed tone when he was excited. He always revealed only a little of what he was feeling. Arjun had noticed that Rahul always used to dress impeccably. His clothes did not have even one stain and his shirt and trouser was always ironed, with the crease showing itself proudly. Everything about him screamed precision and orderliness.

Arjun saw the thin film of tears that had formed over Rahul's dark eyes. They were heavy and it did not take rocket science for Arjun to know

that his brother in law had sobbed not so long ago.

Rahul drew out of the hug and looked at Arjun. Arjun noticed Rahul's swollen and dark eyelids. His face seemed to have been stretched sideways. It looked a lot older than what Arjun had last seen, which was not that long ago. They had done FaceTime about a month back just after Arjun had been hospitalized.

Arjun placed a hand on Rahul's back as he took a slow step for the door. Maria went up to him and gave him a bro hug. The three men walked inside.

Arjun was the last to come in. He closed the door behind him. He saw that Kavya and Kanaka had risen from their seats and were shaking hands with Rahul whose sullen figure was trying its best to stand tall and erect.

Rahul had blonde hair of average length. It was relatively straight and there remained only a vestige of the brown dye he had used several years ago. His face was straight with a slightly long but pointed nose. His thin eyes were light brown and they sat below bushy eyebrows. His shoulders were as broad as shirt hangers and it was evident after even a glimpse that Rahul worked out regularly. He was as big as Vasu or Maria. Rahul was wearing dark trousers and a shirt whose sleeves were rolled up.

'Did you see anyone or notice anything that was suspicious while you were coming here?' Arjun asked, right after he heard the click of the door's lock.

Rahul turned around. Faced Arjun and did not say anything for a few beats as he thought about his journey. He then shook his head sideways and said, 'Nothing. Your bodyguard was good and efficient so even if anyone had tried tailing me they would've remained at bay because of your guy.'

Rahul paused for another beat and then said, 'Do you know where Jui is?'

'No,' Arjun said, 'Not exactly.'

Kavya took a step forward and said, 'When did you last see her?'

Rahul turned around once more. He took a few steps forward, towards the couch. 'This morning. At around six. I had a flight to catch at seven thirty so she woke up with me. We had breakfast together and then I left for the airport.' 'Where did you go for breakfast?'



‘We ate in, at home. She had made *pohe*. She kept insisting to drop me to the airport but I said that would not be necessary.’ Rahul then looked at Arjun and said, ‘What if that was the last time I ever saw Jui? I should have let her drop...’ Rahul’s voice trailed off.

Arjun put a hand on his shoulder. He said, ‘We are going to bring her back. We definitely are.’ The tone of Arjun’s voice became firm as he said, ‘I would not let a bunch of idiots take away our Jui.’

The five people sat around the centre table. Arjun and Kavya sat on the couch, beside each other. Kanaka and Maria occupied the two armchairs. Rahul had pulled a chair from the dining table and was sitting with the television behind her back. Kanaka reckoned she would not be able to give any logistical or tactical support. She decided she would keep the lot hydrated. She headed over to the kitchen and prepared *kokam sherbet* from an instant mix she found by the sink. It had sugar and everything else. She just had to add water to make according to the letters on the sachet pack- ‘the best orange juice in Pune.’

She trotted to the centre table and put the large jar of orange juice on the centre table.

Kavya suddenly rose from her seat.

‘I need a smoke,’ she said to Arjun. ‘Where is your packet and lighter?’ ‘What? You smoke?’ Arjun said.

‘Only when I need to think hard.’

‘I’ve heard all sorts of reasons but that is a first. I’m out of cigarettes. The lighter’s there on the side table by the balcony though.’

‘Not even one?’

‘No.’

Silence.

‘How badly do you need it?’ Arjun said.

‘Pretty. Why?’

‘I’ve a spare packet in Maria’s car.’

It was Maria’s turn to be surprised. He said, ‘You have done that?’

‘Yes, it has been there for several weeks now. I had put in the ash tray under your dash.’

Kavya said, 'Do you mind if I use them?'

'Now I need a smoke too,' Arjun said. He then panned his vision across to look at everyone and said, 'We will come back in ten. Okay?'

He got up as he saw Kavya shuffle up to balcony door and take the lighter. Then she returned to the living room and picked up the map of India. Folded it neatly and tucked it in her trousers. She looked at Maria, 'You can search for one online, right?'

She saw Maria bob his head and then joined Arjun at the door. She said, 'We will be back in ten.'

Maria tossed the keys right across the room to Arjun who did not have to move even an inch as they landed right in front of him, at a comfortable height, around his waist.

'Wear something warm. It is chilly outside,' Rahul said, pivoting from his waist to turn around.

Kavya stretched to reach for her coat and Arjun's sweater which hung on a stand by the door. The two walked out and heard the self-lock's click as the door swung close.

They would've walked briskly down the stairs but Arjun beckoned with his hand to Kavya to use the elevator. She asked him whether he needed his cane but he refused. Inside half a minute they were outside the building, just beyond its vestibule.

'Which is his car?' Kavya said into still air. It was chilly.

Arjun pointed at a car across the road, about twenty yards away and towards the left. He started limping towards it. Kavya straggled close behind him.

Like on all other cars that had been parked outdoors, small and oval drops of water had gathered on the windscreen of Maria's car. While still two feet away, Arjun opened it with a remote control and ducked inside from the driver's side. He saw the ash tray which was more of a box in one of the compartments on the dash. He pulled it out and walked with it up to Kavya. She was standing one car away, so he tossed the ash box to her. She had lit a cigarette by the time he reached her.

She took a long drag and then exhaled the smoke. Plucked out one more cigarette for Arjun. She lit it herself using hers and held it mid-air for

him. A thin stream of smoke curled up from its end.

As he took the cigarette from her, she said in a soft voice, 'Do not look straightaway. But there is a car on the other side of the road. Red sedan. Three buildings away.'

She continued as she saw Arjun move his head subtly. No exaggerated movements. 'See the driver in it?' she said, 'It is a cold day. Or rather it is a cold evening. We are in one of the least happening parts of Pune. Why the hell would anyone wait with their windows rolled down?'

'It is maybe a chauffeur,' Arjun said.

'Still. Windows rolled down on such an evening? Also, He's sure not dressed like a chauffeur. Who wears a turtle neck to work? And notice the way the car is parked? Its driver's side faces the entrance of Maria's building. All the other cars parked here in this row, including Maria's, face the other direction. The driver's side faces the sidewalk, not the building.'

'I know what you're suggesting at,' Arjun said. 'Want to try the man?' 'Hell yes.'

'Let us take our car for a spin.'

'I'm driving though.'

'You have to. I cannot push the brake pedal because of my busted knee.'

'Does Maria mind smoking inside?'

'How do you think I finished three fourth of the pack since today?'

The two were quick to get in. Soon, the interior of the car was filled with nicotine smoke. They did not mind it. Loved it. Arjun took long and deep drags as Kavya turned the ignition key and manoeuvred the car out of the string of cars lined along the sidewalk.

'Let us make it easy for him. I'll turn the car around so he would not have to turn his,' Kavya said.

She was a great driver. Arjun had realised that within seconds after he had got in. The way she turned the steering wheel with just her palm as she turned her neck to look behind was a decent enough proof. And everything happened at a brisk speed too. She did not have to change the gear more than once while pulling the car out.

To give their probable friend a chance to catch up, Kavya slowed

down once she got on the road. She went at twenty-five kilometres an hour and did not turn into any of the lanes. Just kept going straight, within the range of sight of the man who was perhaps keeping an eye on them.

## FORTY-EIGHT

Something strange happened fifteen seconds into their little adventure.

The man did not follow them. Nor in his car, neither any way else. His reflection in the rear view mirror of Maria's car got swallowed by the rest of the cars and the buildings. Kavya continued to drive steadily. She released some pressure off the accelerator pedal. The red pointer of the accelerator dropped under twenty. They drove on.

Both checked the rear view mirror. The man was nowhere in the frame.

The roads were empty. No pedestrians. No cars. The red lights, though, continued their unconditional commitment with the roads with impeccable persistence. Kavya used the brake pedal for the first time as she saw an orange light pop up to turn red. She saw a 'Conserve Fuel' poster on the wall of a building beside her. It was a simple drawing made with crayons. It had a picture of the globe with all the continents coloured in either dark grey or black. She straightaway turned off the engine of the car.

'Want to go back?' she said to Arjun.

'Let us try one more block,' Arjun said as he glanced at the tachometer on the dash. They were already a mile and a half away from Maria's house.

As the light turned green, Kavya again pushed the accelerator and let the car roll ahead.

Still no trace of anyone following them.

'Turn the wheel now,' Arjun said to Kavya, pointing with his index finger to a lane on their left hand side.

Kavya swung the car without questioning Arjun. They entered a relatively narrow lane where street lamps ran along only one side of the street. Cars though were parked on either side. The buildings in the lane were not tall but uniform flat structures. Kavya continued to push the car forward steadily. There were several crossroads in the lane that would eventually join

the main road or some big avenue.

‘Keep driving and then pull over three cross roads from now,’ Arjun said.

‘Got anything particular in mind?’ Kavya asked, as she raised her eyebrows while she continued looking ahead.

‘I think so. Maybe.’

Kavya again did not say anything and continued through with her motions and pulled over where Arjun had said. There was no space for parking on either side, so Kavya parked alongside a silver Honda sedan whose windows had a dark tint. Black maybe. Or an extremely dark shade of purple. The street lamp’s artificial light made it difficult to tell. Plus, Arjun was colour blind.

‘What now?’ Kavya said, still looking at the empty and cold street in front but eyeing Arjun from the corner of her eye.

‘We wait,’ Arjun said as he stabbed his cigarette on the metal plate of the ash tray.

Kavya still had a drag left, maybe two. She sucked on it and said after completely exhaling the smoke, ‘For what?’

‘I’m not sure. But a car with people might come looking for us. It is going to stop somewhere around here soon.’

‘Which car? Who?’

‘Wait and watch. Let it come and I’ll tell.’

Thirty seconds passed and there was absolutely no movement anywhere nearby. If anything at all, it had become even stiller. The street lamps too appeared to have become dimmer.

But then that made it easier for Arjun and Kavya to spot a pair of headlights that turned into their lane right at the same point where they had turned themselves. The headlights grew bigger in size. The car came towards them at a sluggish pace. It was still at the mouth of the lane they were in.

‘The old technique of tailing someone is now obsolete,’ Arjun said. ‘You cannot just follow someone on an empty road and expect they do not notice. Especially if you’re following someone like you who is trained to notice those patterns.’

The car started and they could again see the headlight from the approaching car grow bigger on the road beside them.

‘I cannot believe it did not strike me,’ Kavya said. She ducked over just so much that she could see it. She said, ‘How far are we from Maria’s house?’

‘A little under two kilometres.’

‘Are you also thinking on the lines that they have put a tracer on our car and now they want to see why we have stopped?’ Kavya asked.

Arjun nodded. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘It must be one of those cheap over the counter tracers. Not the best battery or range but they sure do work like a wonder in situations like these.’

Kavya said, ‘They must have put it in the wheel socket or somewhere under the boot.’

‘Too obvious. I would go with roof of the car.’

‘We cannot know for sure now. We are complete goners if we step out right now. The coming car has people who are looking for us.’

Arjun thought for a second. ‘Give me the lighter,’ he said to Kavya.

Kavya dug in her pant pocket and handed it over to Arjun who had quickly began to inspect it.

‘Why what happened?’ she asked.

Arjun held the lighter in one hand and glided it just under the surface of the roof. He started with the area over him, then went leftwards, above Kavya’s head.

Nothing.

He didn’t feel any pull of the magnet on the tracer. He continued to glide it just under the roof. He crawled back and swept the surface under the passenger seat.

Still nothing.

The light from the headlamp became brighter. The car was coming closer. It was more than a block away.

Arjun paid attention to catch even the faintest of pulls. He continued to move the lighter around. He took it under the area where the cabin light

and its switch were placed. Hovered the lighter around it.

That's when he felt the pull. The car crept closer.

The pull got strong. He had to put in some effort for it not stick to the roof. His face broke into half a grin. 'I can feel it,' he said. 'It must be right in the centre. Makes sense. I should have started off in that place.'

The two had been looking at the rear view mirror and observing every movement of the approaching car all along as they spoke. They saw the pair of headlamps suddenly turn into one of the several narrow crossroads.

'Why did it turn? It was supposed to come for us,' Kavya said.

Then like many professors of Philosophy, she answered her question herself. She said, 'They might park the car somewhere far away and then walk over here.'

Silence.

A blink passed. Then one more.

No movement. No noise.

Another blink went by. They waited. *Patience.*

Then there were two sounds. Soft and smudged. Like horse hooves coming down a concrete road. There was a deliberate effort to keep it quiet. The voices come from a distance.

Arjun said urgently, 'Duck down. Fast. Now.'

Kavya bent down and got under the level of the dash. Arjun let out a muzzled anguish of pain as he bent in his knee while crouching low on his seat.

Stillness engulfed the night once again.

More silence.

'Three people in total,' Kavya said, almost inaudible to Arjun. 'The driver is maybe still inside. Two are out. The noises resembled urgent footsteps. The two that are out will try to figure out where and why we have stopped.'

'Or maybe two people in total. They might have just locked their damn car and stepped out,' Arjun said.

'Maybe.'



‘How do you intend to take this?’

‘We can ambush them. Take one from either side. But that will work only if there are two people. If there is a third person behind the wheel, he may be alerted by these two and then turn aggressive on us.’

‘Sit and wait?’

‘Yes. If they are still out two minutes from now, I can move out and check what is happening. You can keep an eye out for me. If they make me, then you can move to the wheel and drive out. And I know you cannot drive with the things going on around your leg but you said earlier that you cannot press the brake pedal as desired and required. In this case, if things get out of hand you would not need the goddamn brake. You just need to get as far as possible as quickly as possible. And I’m sure you can handle a car in a worst case situation. OK?’

‘I cannot leave you behind just like that,’ Arjun said.

Kavya opened her mouth to speak but Arjun went on. He said, ‘You cannot go out. If they make you, they kill you.’ Kavya did not respond.

Arjun took out his phone and held it at an angle, ensuring that the screen pointed downwards so that light emanating from it could not be seen from out of the window. He texted Maria to tell him that somebody had been following them and then promptly put his phone back inside after putting it on vibration mode. He told Kavya to do the same.

Two minutes passed. No movement outside.

Kavya then sat up halfway and tried to look over the hood. There were several cars in the middle that blocked her view. She shook her head and said, ‘Try looking out from your side.’

Arjun crawled up from his crouched position. He did not entirely lift himself, just pressed the seat with his hands and scooped his head upwards.

He looked for shadows. He looked at the building walls and the ground.

Nothing.

He ducked back to his crouched position.

‘What do we do now?’ he said.

‘We have to go out and grab them. That is the only way we can get any information on the whereabouts of Jui,’ Kavya said and then paused to

gauge Arjun's reaction. She did not get much from his face or body language. She said, 'Do you have your gun?'

Arjun felt for his waist holster. He could feel it poking him but he wanted to double check if the gun was inside. 'Yes,' he said. 'Seventeen rounds.'

'I've mine too. Loaded and unused for a long time. I cannot wait to go out and get them.'

'What is our plan of action? So, we shoot when we see them or what?'

'Try to get them alive. Aim for their lower body parts. Under the thigh will be perfect. But do not be shy to go all out if the situation calls for it.' 'On three,' she said.

They opened their doors gradually with utmost caution. The guns were ready in their hands. They left the car doors slightly open and stepped out. Both dropped on their knees on either side of the car. Arjun looked around him to spot the two people who were trying to keep an eye on them. He could not see anyone in his field of vision. Then he shot a cursory glance under the car to see where Kavya was.

He could not see any part of her shoes or legs.

Then he felt a pat on his back.

He turned around, startled. It was Kavya. She put a finger on her lips. The other hand held the gun. 'Hear that?' she said, as she leaned forward.

Arjun channelled every vestige of his attention to listen to what Kavya was talking about. He could hear whispers. Two people. Both men. They were trying to speak softly. Genuine effort. The voices came from an alley which was between two buildings, about five cars across. They were talking back and forth.

Then their voices were replaced by footsteps that gradually became louder. They would not have been audible had Arjun and Kavya not looked out for them specifically. But their sound kept going up.

'Quick. Move to the other side,' Kavya said and sprang around the hood. Arjun was slightly slow to get off the blocks. He had to lower the amount of pressure on his busted leg, transfer it to the other leg and then hop across.

Then the sound of the footsteps died down as gradually as it had first

started. But that was not a problem anymore because Arjun and Kavya could see the two men through the gaps between cars.

Both were tall and lean. Around thirty years old. One was bald. The other had hair. Both were wearing black clothes. Nothing about them even whispered legitimate.

Kavya was sitting on the ground with her weight rallying almost entirely on one of her knees. In that position itself, she pushed herself forward, towards the boot of the car. The road was to their left. The sidewalk and the bald man to their right. He was still about fifteen average steps away. He had one hand in his pants' front pocket. The other swayed back and forth as he came closer to them.

Arjun said, 'What if the other person, the one with hair, comes from behind? I need to look after this front. You handle the bald guy.'

Kavya nodded and again stared at the bald man's moving legs from under all the cars.

## FORTY-NINE

The bald man was walking slowly. He was perhaps checking and searching the space between every car. He didn't seem hurried. He was wearing black sneakers. White socks. Bad choice because when Kavya decided to take the shot, she aimed for the sock as it was just the kind of contrast any marksman would hope for.

She waited for the right moment. The man continued walking. She lay flat on the road. She stretched her arms completely in front of her. The gun was secure in her grip. It had a long cylinder attached to its barrel. A finger on the trigger and two eyes on the slow moving outline of the legs of the bald man. White socks. They were right in front of her, moving along gradually.

Then the man stopped moving. He collapsed to the ground a flash after Kavya squeezed the trigger of her gun with her index finger two times.

Both shots hit the target.

The first bullet hit the ankle of the right leg. The second screamed in the same direction, splitting the still air as it again hit the ankle, just beside the first shot. The white of the socks turned red.

Right within the next beat, Kavya saw the man's black clothes and his hairless head heap on the ground.

'Got him,' she said, riding high on an adrenaline rush.

Then she got up from her shooting stance as she jumped back on her feet. One quick motion. She scampered around the car's hood and faced the person she had just shot. He was not looking at her. In fact, did not even notice her. He was far from dead and still moving. He was not in any big danger either. Just wounded. Reallybadly. He was scrambling on the ground, trying to get away. Two shots in the leg would've decapitated even a big man. But the bald guy was not even that heavy.

He was nailed to the ground. He moved a lot, but went nowhere like the party in an auction who raised the banner a lot but kept their entire purse intact. He had been shot in the right places. Bony places.

He felt terrified when he saw Kavya. He saw just her silhouette against the lights from the streetlamp from the edge of his vision. He quickly

realized he was breathing his last breaths. So, he raised his hands. Let Kavya know that she was in control and he was willing to do anything she wanted.

Kavya did not take a shot. Instead she walked towards him and put a finger on her lips. She looked beyond her left shoulder and saw that Arjun had rose from the ground. When he noticed Kavya look towards him, he shook his head, and then held out his hand to shake it too. He scuttled to the sidewalk up to Kavya.

Kavya pulled out one of those retailer style self-locking handcuffs from the back pocket of her pants. She held them out in front of her to make sure the bald man saw them and then tossed them on the ground, beside him. She then jerked her gun towards it.

The bald man had to struggle a bit to reach the handcuffs even though they were not more than half a hand away. He wore them promptly and again thundered his hands as high up as he possibly could.

Kavya then did the same for legs. She did not have another pair of handcuffs so she used to the bald man's belt. It was not made from leather, but instead from strong and stiff fibre bound together tightly over a buckle made of metal. She then dragged him on the ground and pulled him between two cars parked alongside. A trail of blood in the form of three faint and thin lines followed after him on sidewalk.

Then Arjun took over manning the bald guy. He pointed the gun at him. The bald guy had lowered his hands, but they still lay in front of him, under his chest. His breaths were loud and short.

Kavya whispered, 'I'll go look for the other guy.'

Kavya continued to search the bald man. She started off with his breast pockets. Nothing there. There hardly is, she thought, apart from a used handkerchief that had dried phlegm. She moved to his pant pockets. She expected something of value in them.

She felt her fingers glide over two .9 mm cartridges. She identified them straightaway because she used the same for her gun. She pocketed them herself and then continued with the search. She moved to the back pocket of his pants. Nothing there either. She moved down from there. Tapped it along with way for any bulges.

*He has to have a gun. No one carries just cartridges.*

And then she found it. It was tucked inside the sock of his right leg. She pocketed the gun too. Searched the rest of his body. Found nothing else. Not even threads of a used tissue paper. Kavya got up. Arjun was standing guard, looking for the other guy.

They opened the boot and shoved the man inside. Kavya pushed it close and heaved out a heavy breath.

## FIFTY

Kavya knelt down from her waist, hands on knees. Drops of sweat that originated from her scalp, trickled down her forehead to drip on the ground. 'Okay,' she said, standing back up upright, 'The second guy now.'

Arjun walked around their car's bonnet. Kavya joined him by his right elbow. They walked on the pavement, along the sidewalk for five minutes.

Silence.

Then they saw the man they were looking for. He had just emerged out from an alley in front of them. Thirty feet away maybe.

They were sure it was the man they were looking. They had seen that baseball cap and those black clothes not so long ago. The man too, was sure that the two persons that were staring at him were the same people he had been ordered to follow and then eventually kill.

The baseball cap hesitated for a flash. Whether to fight or whether to run? He went in for the second option and ran away from Arjun and Kavya, as fast as could.

Kavya darted behind him. She was quick, but the baseball cap was quicker. He had several things going for him. He had started just before Kavya. That had given him a second and five metres of an advance.

The sound of their heavy footsteps echoed in the air.

Arjun could not run. He just stood still, right where he was. Then an idea came to him like a periscope in a rampaging sea. He moved sideways towards the road. He could see the baseball cap turn into the crossroad where he had seen the car turn. Kavya must have been forty metres behind him and he saw her turn five seconds after the baseball cap went in.

Arjun heard the footsteps fade into a silence which was in a Matter of seconds engulfed by the roar of a car engine ramping it up. He stood right in the middle of the road, on one of the faint white dashes. Two seconds later, he saw a beam of headlights emanating from the lane and falling on the road ahead. Another two seconds later, the lights swung on to the main road. They did not head for the mouth of the road but instead zoomed in right in the

direction where Arjun was standing.

The headlamps roared on full beam. Arjun's eyes hurt as he looked at the coming car. He squinted, narrowing his eyes. But he held his own as the car came closer. The car's driver, a young and frail man, suddenly increased the speed of the car when he saw that Arjun was standing in its way.

Arjun raised the gun in his hand. He did not have the best aim. But he was aware of that shortcoming. He did not think of himself as any Robin Hood. He also knew he had seventeen rounds of bullets.

Good enough, he thought, to derail the car off the road.

He then followed the advice given to an amateur photographer by another amateur photographer. Point and shoot.

He held the gun straight. Then squeezed the trigger. It did not have a silencer so it heaved up a thunderous crack in the night air. The bullet followed the beam of the blazing light emanating from the headlamp.

The first bullet missed the car. Instead, it went somewhere to the far right. Even if it had gone straight, the projectile of its line would've taken it above the car.

But Arjun was a fabulous student. He realised his mistake quickly and adjusted the height and line of the gun's aim. Squeezed the trigger, once more. The bullet again screamed as it rushed out of the barrel.

This time he hit the car, but just. One of the headlamps exploded with a massive thud. The road suddenly grew dimmer. Arjun fired again. Once, twice, thrice and then a few more times. Thirteen flashes of light. Thirteen cracks in the air. Thirteen bullets in total.

Seven of them hit the car.

One hit the front tyre. The one on the right side. Two more hit the windshield which busted the entire frame of glass. Five hit random parts of the car. All kinds of areas like the side mirrors and the front cage. Three clunked the car's metallic frame as they just about scraped it.

The final two bullets took down the goddamn driver and the car went haywire.

*Derail the car off the road. Objective accomplished.*

FIFTY-ONE



The car had gone out of control. The dead driver's motionless head had steered it to the right into a string of other cars that had been parked along the sidewalk. A loud bang was followed by a brief spell silence as the car rammed into the pavement.

Arjun saw Kavya appear from the crossroad junction. She was running, panting. She had only seen the part where the car had let itself loose.

She swooped her eyes across the road and saw Arjun. He was still standing in the middle of the road. He was still holding the gun in front of him, at about chest level, as if he was posing for a photo shoot for the promo of an action movie. She ran towards him. She tried her best to run fast but all she could manage was a highly animated jog. She had already gone past her decided running kilometres for the day.

Arjun saw Kavya and then relaxed his stance. Limped towards the car. He surprised himself with his speed. The adrenaline in his veins had taken away pain temporarily. He felt a bolt of energy rush through him. He reached the site at which the car had derailed off the road. At that point, Kavya was still about fifteen odd cars to the other side.

The driver was not the person who Arjun and Kavya had seen along with the bald guy. Instead the baseball cap man was sitting behind, on the passenger's seat. He had ducked down as soon as Arjun had gone berserk with the gun. He had opened the door to his right to escape right after he had seen the driver's blood splatter across the shattered and absent windshield.

But everything had happened a bit too soon.

The car, even after the driver was shot, was being pushed forward because he had one foot on the acceleration pedal.

Inside a picosecond, one side of the car had smashed into other cars and the door at the baseball cap's end had got stuck. A part of it had dented inside. Big time.

Silence.

Chaos over.

At least for the next few minutes.

Kavya joined Arjun beside the car wreck. They knew the baseball cap was still inside.

Kavya said, as she just about managed to speak while panting, 'We have got one man. We can quiz him. We do not need the one in here. Let us go.'

Arjun glanced back at her. 'But he will alert his people about this little adventure if we let him go.'

'He might be dead for all we know,' replied Kavya.

'Might is the key word there.'

'Give me your gun.' More silence.

Kavya said, 'Are you sure?'

She saw Arjun's head bob up and down.

She tossed it to him. He caught it by its butt. Placed his index finger on the trigger. Kavya stepped forward and joined him at his right elbow.

'He would be alert now. He knows we're coming for him,' Kavya said.

'We know you're the boss of the dead driver and the other man we have in our car's boot. We also know that you know a lot more than either one of them. Cooperate with us and we will make a deal or some similar shit. I'm a man of my word. Come out willingly or I'll hunt you down and rip you apart.' They waited. Nothing. No man emerged. No reaction. No nothing.

Kavya joined the party. 'I'm going to count five,' she said.

She had been in a number of situations of a similar nature. She knew what tripped the other person. First was the promise for a better future. Arjun had done that. But there was something else that catalysed the entire process. Throw in a time bomb. It does wonders, her late mentor had once told her.

And it had always worked perfectly for Kavya. She always picked a five second countdown. To her, three seemed too less. Ten seemed a lot. Any number in between and the other person would waste a second or two trying to figure out why you have selected an odd number. So, she went in with five. Always.

'We would need to force our way in if you do not come out willingly. We have guns. The car has a fuel tank. One bullet inside it and you along with the car would be set ablaze. I've heard about people burn to death. Terrible thing. Ultra-painful too. So, five it is then, right? I'm going to start

counting,' Kavya said, calmly.

She stayed quiet for a beat and then said, 'Starting now.'

She counted up to three when the baseball cap cried out from inside, 'Stop it. I'm coming out,'

Arjun and Kavya heard several noises come from inside the car. The lock of door had been smashed and the entire door frame had been bumped out of shape. The baseball cap tried to force his way out. He hit the door hard several times.

Arjun saw a few people look at the road from their windows. Each person was trying to make sense of what had happened. Each one must have had a different theory. But someone would've definitely called the cops because a siren swirled in the distance.

'Use the other door,' Arjun said. He used every vestige of his acting skills to not let anxiety show in his voice.

The noise of the baseball cap trying to force his way out of the broken door faded away. It was replaced by the soft customary tick of the opening door when he came out from the other side. He saw Arjun standing right in front of him, the gun pointed in his direction. Kavya was standing some distance behind with Arjun's gun in her hand. The baseball cap raised his hands. 'This is a mistake,' he said. 'I'll speak but you have to let me go.' Arjun and Kavya exchanged looks.

'Walk with us,' Kavya said. 'Keep your hands raised all the way.'

Then she beckoned with her hand for Arjun to move forward and the baseball cap to follow. She had her gun aimed at his chest as she walked five feet behind him.

She said, 'The possibility of a bullet ripping through you is still very much possible.'

The baseball cap did not respond. He walked behind Arjun as they neared the car.

Kavya had its keyless entry remote control in her hand which she operated over her jeans by feeling for a large button and then pressing it. Arjun stepped forward and opened the boot. The bald man was still inside. He was blinded by the lights that flooded the boot's interior and he straightaway covered his face with his palms. He might have caught a

glimpse of his baseball cap boss but he was more hell bent on saving himself so he remained silent.

Kavya searched him for any guns or mobile phones. She found none.

‘I’m sorry but I’ve to do this,’ she said, looking at the baseball cap.

She took her gun back from Arjun and sent two bullets in the right ankle of the baseball cap. He felt a bolt of excruciating pain rocket up even before he fell to the ground. She was shooting from under ten feet so she had absolutely nailed the shot.

‘That ensures that you would not be able to run. Do not worry. It only hurts now. The pain will linger for maybe a couple of days but then you would not feel your sole or toes. You also would not be able to walk or run in the coming months. But that serves you well. Doesn’t it?’

The baseball cap did not hear what she had said. The pain, in itself, was immense. He picked up the key words though. *Pain, couple of days. Not feel sole and toes. No walk, no run.*

He stared at Kavya in disbelief. She then raised her right leg out of nowhere and sent it cruising into his groin. The soles of her boot were black and thick and they made a heavy impact on strike.

‘Let us do this,’ she said to Arjun.

The two of them lifted the baseball cap and put him inside the boot along with the bald guy who had witnessed the entire scene. He was still feeling the pain but its extent had just about reduced for him to be able to pay attention.

Arjun noticed what Kavya had done by shooting and kicking the baseball cap. She had successfully instilled fear in his colleague. He would’ve realised that she and Arjun would not stop at anything to get information. They had their two captives under the mat.

Arjun closed the boot and then sat in the car along with Kavya.

The car crash had alerted the police and the fire fighters but by the time they would've reached, Arjun and Kavya were far away from the scene of chaos. Their faces and their action would've been captured by the tens of CCTV cameras in the area but it would've taken ages for anyone to locate and try them in any court.

As Kavya drove on, he thought about how they could get Jui back. He looked at the screen of his phone. No calls from Abu Farooq. He put it back in his pocket and looked at the stillness outside. The roads were empty apart one alley where a drunk man had passed out.

It was exactly ten thirty when Kavya pulled the car over to where it had been parked before, outside Maria's apartment. She pocketed the cigarette packet and the lighter and then stepped out.

'What do you want to do with the two in the boot?' she asked Arjun as she opened her door.

'Let them be in there. We can use the muscle of Rahul to get them out. I'm already feeling my knee throb.'

The concierge rose from his chair and nodded his head in acknowledgement. Arjun and Kavya walked past him and entered the lift. It was on the ground floor itself and within half a minute they were staring at the wooden door of Maria's apartment.

Arjun rang the bell.

He suddenly realised that he was extremely thirsty. He waited for Maria or Kanaka or Rahul to open the door. He wondered what they must have talked about while they were gone. It had been about half an hour since they had stepped out for having a smoke. Twenty minutes since he had texted Maria to tell him about the car that was following them.

Kavya became impatient. She rang the bell again and called out, 'Hey there, Maria?'

No response.

The next instance, almost simultaneously, both Arjun and Kavya felt their stomach shrink from inside. It happened rapidly. Lasted for maybe half a second. Then they exchanged looks. It was as if someone had whispered in their ears that something had gone wrong.

Arjun rang the doorbell again. It sounded sharper the third time. But

that was only because he noticed it amid the frightening hush that had encapsulated every morsel of the air.

There was no third time lucky.

Arjun and Kavya stared at the polished wood of the door. Arjun took a step forward and examined the keyhole. He turned back and said, 'Looks alright to me.'

Kavya said, 'Step away. I'm taking on the goddamn thing.'

Arjun stepped away and saw Kavya take a start of two average length strides. He thought she was going to kick it down. But he was wrong. Instead, she took a casual step forward. Then untied her hair which fell over her shoulders. Held the bobby pin that had kept her hair kempt. Straightened it out from the middle so that its two tines unbent into one. Then twisted its centre to break it from the middle into two pieces.

She struggled with it briefly before she picked the lock. They walked in.

## FIFTY-THREE

The first thing that hit Arjun was the calmness. Nothing was different. No objects flung here or there. No disarray. No half open drawers. Everything was in its place. Right where it was supposed to be. Right where they had left it. The almost empty jar of coffee was still on the centre table and so were the four cups. The chairs of the dining table were still in place, pointing towards the couch and the armchairs, just as they were half an hour ago.

'Maria? Kanaka?' Kavya called out as she took a cautious step forward, 'Rahul?'

No response.

The calmness inside magnified and grew deep into their ears. It drilled its way up to their drums. Its echo lingered.

'What the hell has happened in here?' Kavya said.

Arjun limped into the room where Kanaka had slept in the evening. He saw the same thing. Nothing was out of place. He ducked into Maria's room. Nothing there either.

Then he came out, back in the living room when he heard Kavya's voice.

'Their mobile phones are here. All three. In fact, even Mahesh Bhatia'. So, four in total,' she said.

Arjun looked around, tried to understand what had happened. He had nothing to work on. Kavya went around the entire house too. She returned with the same perplexed mind as Arjun's. They looked at each other.

Kavya shook her head. 'I'm getting a terrible feeling about this,' she said.

Goosebumps flung high and wide on Arjun's arms. He felt a shiver resonate through his body. Then Kavya's phone started ringing. It was Abu Farooq.

She answered the call and put the phone on speaker.

'I've located the plane you guys are looking for,' he said. 'I could not spot it while it was airborne. It must have flown under the radar. But I've half a dozen eye witness accounts that saw a small plane land about forty kilometres north of Pune. It landed, as we had reckoned, on a flat stretch of land which was kept aside for farming. It touched ground ten minutes back. The eye witnesses also claim that at least three people got out of it. One woman and two men.'

It took a spell for Arjun and Kavya to comprehend the entire scope of information.

Arjun said, 'Does the woman match Jui's description?'

'I cannot say for sure. But the woman has dark hair just like Jui. The eye witnesses, you see, were a bunch of who were working on the adjoining piece of land. So, they could only see so much.'

'Did they notice where the three people went after coming out of the plane?' Kavya said.

'They walked for a length but then they had disappeared by the time the eye witnesses reached the site where the plane had touched down.'

'They would've taken some sort of a vehicle to get out of there,'

Arjun said. 'Can you please check for any stolen tractors or jeeps from the vicinity?'

Farooq said, 'I did that already. No theft has been reported till now otherwise that would've popped up in my search results. But it has been only ten minutes so far. So, if you want to find out right now, you would've to personally call everyone in that area. You're in luck because there are only three farmers there in the radius of two kilometres.' 'Send me their numbers,' Arjun said.

The night's silence resounded once more as Farooq hung up after giving the numbers.

'At least we know that Jui is here now,' Kavya said.

A part of Arjun felt relieved. *She's fine. She could walk so no major injuries.* Another part of him had collapsed into a deflated shiver. He did not know where everyone had gone all of a sudden. He was lost in thought and so he did not see Kavya go into Maria's bedroom.

He was distracted when she patted his arms. He broke out of his stiff posture with a startle.

'Are you alright?' Kavya said. 'I called your name out two times and I came from right in front of you.'

Arjun rubbed his eyes with closed fists. He nodded. 'What happened?' he said.

Kavya shot him a suspecting glance. She hesitated a tad and said, 'I checked his bedroom as well as the living room drawers. Could not find his gun, so it must be with him.'

'It doesn't make sense. Why would they have just left? And that too without informing us?' Arjun said.

'What if they did not leave voluntarily?' Kavya asked, suddenly feeling the need to catch a breather. She saw Arjun raise his eyebrows as she settled deep into the fluffy cushion.

She went on. 'What if they were forced to leave?' she said.

'Like by someone? Some sort of a blackmail?'

'I was thinking more on the lines of a situation that pushed them out of here. See they have left behind their mobile phones but not their guns. Just like we took a detour to see if we were being followed, they too might have



sensed something amiss and gone off. Hold on, I'll go ask the concierge if he noticed anything.'

Arjun walked up to the side table by the balcony door as Kavya scampered out. He picked up Maria's phone and fiddled around with it.

Kavya returned inside a minute. 'The concierge has no idea of what has happened up here,' she said.

Arjun took a few steps forward and joined Kavya. He tilted the phone in his hand and said, 'Look. Maria opened my message. The one in which I told him that we thought someone was on our trail.' 'So, they went off after that,' Kavya said.

Silence.

The two thought about what might have happened.

They found out soon.

## FIFTY-FOUR

They found out twelve minutes later, exactly when the clock struck ten forty-seven. They had mostly been silent till then. Arjun had drunk four glasses of water to relieve his thirst while Kavya had sat on the couch in silence.

Then Arjun's phone started ringing.

It was the same guy who had called him twice before. Charlie.

'I hope you had a good evening, Mr Arjun Parekh,' Charlie said.

He said, 'I sure had fun when I blew out the car and the men you had sent for me.'

'Yes, I heard. I heard about that,' Charlie said promptly. 'I did not like that one bit, you know. And as a payback, you know that bitch that keeps coming back to assholes, I've with me some more people you care about. You want to know who? I think you must have guessed already. You're smart that way. I underestimated you earlier. And now you have that hot chick with you as well.'

She has been a pain in our asses for a long time now. Prickly little thing she's. You know, I...'

‘You piece of shit,’ Arjun said, cutting Charlie as he spoke.

Charlie cut Arjun back. He said, ‘I would be careful with the words I choose to use if I was in your place. You see, I’ve with me, four people you care about. If you piss me off now, one of them will,’ the man paused. He made a humming sound for three seconds and then said, ‘I’ll put it bluntly. One of them will die. And now with the sheer number, I can get to experience that joy thrice or even for a fourth time if you do not deliver on your promise.’

Charlie went on. ‘I want the evidence, the two briefcases,’ he said, ‘in two hours. I’ll decide the place now. You will be informed about it fifteen minutes prior at twelve forty-five. Do not play any tricks. You know what’s at stake. And we would not just kill them but we will also come after you.’

‘How did they get in and then leave without leaving a trace?’ he said, with his face still buried in his palms. ‘No signs of struggle either.’

‘Something might have tipped them off to open the door. The lock and all the windows are still secure. Even the anti-theft is still active,’ Kavya said.

‘They could have picked the lock like you did.’

‘Maybe. But that doesn’t explain the no struggle part. Even if someone would’ve picked the lock there should have been some signs of a struggle inside. Like something fallen down or broken or out of place. None of that has happened.’

‘What if they were abducted by someone they trusted? By someone they voluntarily let in by opening the door and laying a red carpet?’ Arjun said.

‘Like that guy who escorted Rahul till here. He might have been threatened or something and forced into all of this. They were keeping an eye here on this building anyway.’

Arjun rose from his seat and asked Kavya for the pack of cigarettes she had got up along with her. He lit one and puffed away as he paced the floor of the house. Kavya could not resist the temptation and lit one herself. She remained seated as she sucked on her cigarette. Neither of them spoke for the next five minutes.

He said, ‘We need to focus on how we can get all of them back and

not try to think of how they vanished. That is not going to take us anywhere.'

Kavya stabbed the stub of the cigarette on the glass centre table. 'We have to find the lawyer for that, she said. 'Nikita Verma.'

'Her last known location was her house. She has been under the radar since then. Where could she possibly have gone?'

'We should take into consideration that Mugdha met her twice yesterday.'

'Or just once. You know, if Mugdha was taken before she met Nikita Verma the second time around.'

'That could have happened,' Kavya said. She thought for a spell. Narrowed her eyes and pouted her narrow lips. She said, 'In fact let us think of the entire scenario considering that Mugdha was taken before she met Nikita Verma for the second time yesterday evening. What would Nikita Verma have done in that case?'

Arjun did not answer the question right away. He waited. Thought about the situation from Nikita Verma's perspective. He said, 'I'm Nikita Verma. I've evidence which is incriminating and can nail several people at the top of the chain. All influential people. Big names.'

He paused for a flash and then continued. 'I'm supposed to meet a person who wants all these people on high positions to be tried in a court. I'm supposed to meet someone who wants justice, someone who wants to avenge the humiliation that her husband has faced. I trust that person because she's doing it for all the right reasons which do not even remotely include her personal self-interest. But then that person doesn't show up. I try her phone but there is no response. I panic.'

Kavya said, 'Maybe Nikita Verma was even told beforehand by Mugdha that her life was in danger. Maybe Nikita Verma had been asked to go through with the process irrespective of who is still there and who is not.'

'Correct,' Arjun said. 'So why have I not still gone through? Why am I still mum? What is stopping me from exposing the corrupt?'

Then Arjun answered his own question. 'Maybe she's waiting to let things calm down a notch,' he said. 'She knows of two murders so far. Her client and his wife's. She must be scared for her own life right now especially

if she has the evidence.'

Kavya remained silent. Arjun lit another cigarette. He wanted to pace the floor once more but he felt a thump in his knee. He kept sitting and inhaled and exhaled the smoke as he thought.

He felt he was missing out on something. He thought hard. The last twenty-four hours flashed in his mind in the form of pictures. All in black and white for some reason. They came like thunder and went like lightning. Ferociously quickly.

Kavya watched on while she thought about the entire situation herself. She had lit a cigarette too. She briefly observed Arjun as he fidgeted idiosyncratically in his chair. Then she moved all her focus to her way of tackling the entire situation. She did it by using a more clinical method.

She first tried to wonder why the butler had said that Nikita Verma was in Singapore of all places. *Any clue there?* She quickly debunked that angle as she wondered whether the butler was in on anything that his boss was doing. Kavya guessed that Nikita Verma would've stayed in Pune given that she knew she was the centre of all attention.

But then her chain of thoughts was broken as Arjun suddenly got up from his chair.

Captain Sourabh

He said, 'I think I know where Nikita Verma is.'

## FIFTY-FIVE

The clock in the living room told Arjun and Kavya that it was eleven thirteen. Soon after that, Arjun made a phone call to Abu Farooq which lasted for a couple of minutes. He got off the phone and punched the air just like a tennis player who had broken the opponent's serve.

Arjun then calmed himself down. Seventy-five more minutes until the exchange was going to happen, he told himself. He took out his mobile phone and went to his default time application. Tapped the screen several times to start a countdown. Instead of seventy-five minutes, he set it for seventy minutes.

He then looked at Kavya who was staring at him. Her mouth was half open.

Her brows were raised. Her senses had been piqued.

‘Where?’ she asked him.

Arjun got up rapidly.

‘Take your stuff. We need to go. I’ll tell you on the way. Time is short and vital,’ he said as he looked at the countdown timer that he had set.

It read sixty-nine minutes and some seconds.

‘I’ve only two rounds left in my Glock. Do you have another gun?’ Arjun said.

‘Yes, I do. I took one from the bald guy,’ she said. ‘I’m sure Maria has an extra one at home. All good cops have a backup.’

‘Do you have one at your home?’

‘Yes, I’ve one at my current house here in Pune too.’

Silence.

Kavya said, ‘Which Glock is it?’

‘Seventeen.’

‘You do not need any more guns. I picked up two cartridges from the bald guy who is now in our car’s trunk. I’m sure that the baseball cap will have some too. Ammunition is not a problem. We have fourteen bullets. Each can reduce the capacity of one person to the ashes. We have enough.’

Arjun broke step for the door. 'Let us get going then.'

'I'm taking your cane just as a precaution.'

Arjun did not respond and heard Kavya's steps as she straggled behind him after closing the door.

The lift and the corridors were warm. They felt cosy. But the air outside was several degrees lower. It was cold. The uncomfortable kind. Made everyone wish they had another warmer cover or two. Kavya and Arjun could see Maria's car parked across the street. It was exactly in the same position as they had left before.

They marched towards it. Kavya hopped around and walked by raising her knee up high to relax the muscles that had stiffened up. Arjun wanted to stretch too but at the same time, he wanted to play it safe with his knee. He had already exerted it much more beyond than what any sane doctor would've permitted him. It had held up well so far. Just an odd shot of wacky pain every now and then. Nothing more. Arjun wanted to keep it that way.

'What do you want to do about the two in the trunk?' Kavya said, as they crossed the road.

'We will need them later,' Arjun said promptly. 'Let them be in the trunk. They would not misbehave or cause any trouble in there, right?'

Kavya opened the car with the remote control. They were two strides away from it.

'No,' she said. 'Not a chance. They would not be able to even stand up. Do not worry about them.'

They sat inside the car. Arjun turned up the heater straightaway. Hot air started getting pumped instantaneously from the blowers and it flooded the interiors.

'Where to?' Kavya asked as she turned on the car and ramped up the engine.

Arjun told her an address and they were off the very next instance.

He looked at the countdown timer on the screen of his mobile phone.

Boom Baby

Sixty-five minutes to go.



## FIFTY-SIX

The car glided on the empty roads and along the street lamps that got taller and brighter as they moved into the business part of the city. Neither of them spoke a word during the first five minutes of their ride. The only voice in the car cabin came from outside even though the windows were closed tight. It was of the car's tyres as they rolled over the fine and smooth roads.

Arjun also fed an address in the car's GPS system. It was colourful as it lit up. The buildings and roads were in blue and bright red while the route they had to take was shown in yellow. Right after showing the route, the GPS' voice assistant said, 'Eleven minutes to go. Light traffic.'

Kavya said as the navigation lady stopped giving instructions, 'You seem confident. But what makes you think Nikita Verma is where we are going?'

'Do you know whose house we are going to?' Arjun asked.

Kavya shook her head subtly and said, 'No, not a clue.'

Arjun made an acknowledging sound and then said, 'Okay, so let me tell you this bit. Today morning, when Maria first told me about Mugdha's murder he had mentioned something really interesting. It seemed to draw my attention back then but a lot happened after that and it did not take much time to take the back seat. Maria had told me that there had been a murder some months back for which the same gun as the one that that was used to kill Mugdha was used. Some ballistic theory. You would know more about it. That murder, just like Mugdha's, had happened on Pashan Road. Similar time. In the wee hours of the morning. The police had put it down as a mugging gone wrong.'

Arjun saw Kavya nod her head. He went on as he said, 'The person then killed was a woman too. Married with kids. Neither she nor her family knew

Mugdha or Manoj.'

'So?' Kavya said.

'I believe that those two were also somehow involved in the entire corporate espionage affair. They knew something or did something that

pissed off the bosses. The man lost his wife because of that. He must have straightened himself out after that and played it safe,' he said and then took a long pause. Turned to look at the profile of Kavya's face and said, 'Until now.'

He saw Kavya's eyes get narrow. He continued speaking. 'Nikita Verma would've figured it out. She's a good lawyer. I went through her client list when we were at her apartment. It includes several big business tycoons. She would've found out about the murder of the man's wife. She would've done her homework when she was brought into the loop by Manoj and Mugdha. She must have read about the murder that had happened some months back. Maybe, Manoj had even told her about it.

And maybe Nikita Verma even contacted the man telling him that there is a way in which his wife's murderers can be punished. Think how the man would've felt. His back must have been against the wall. No potential chance to get out of the business he wanted to let go off. Then suddenly an opportunity presents itself. Literally packed in a glittering gift wrap with a ribbon and all. He must grab the opportunity though and he only needs to do one thing for that.'

Kavya cut in. She said, 'Give shelter to Nikita Verma. Keep her away from the apparent danger. Keep her protected. I get it.'

The sound of them talking was again replaced by the hiss of the tyres.

Kavya said when they were two minutes away from their destination, 'All this will only hold true if the murders are related and if Nikita Verma was wise and alert enough to spot the pattern.'

'We will find out soon,' Arjun said. 'Park the car right in front of the house. We need to talk to her and then immediately get out of there. We do not even have a second to waste.'

Kavya brought the car to a skidding halt as she pressed hard on the brake pedal. The house they were interested in was to their right.

'Use the cane,' Kavya said. 'It creates a more trustworthy image.'

The two got out. Kavya joined Arjun who was leaning on his cane as he stared at the house.

It was a typical city row house. Three storeyed with a small porch that

had a small swing. The walls were white and the sloping roof was red. There were two windows each that overlooked the street on every floor. All curtains were drawn. Two windows on the ground floor had their lights turned on. The second floor was completely dark while the third had a dim light whose colour Arjun could not identify.

The lawn in the common yard in the front was mowed impeccably throughout the neighbourhood. It was lush green and was lined in several places with shrubs that had colourful flowers.

They walked up to the sidewalk in front of the house. There was a small wooden placard rooted in the ground and painted white. It had a name and an address on it. Suresh Kumar, 27/3 South Main Road. There was also a wooden letter box beside the placard.

‘His wife’s name was Snigdha,’ Arjun said.

They walked along a narrow tiled path up to the porch steps. Exchanged looks just before they climbed it. Arjun’s cane made a crisp knock on the wooden porch.

‘How do you want to go about it?’ he asked Kavya.

‘Good cop bad cop?’ she asked, raising her brows.

Arjun shook his head. ‘No time for that,’ he said. ‘We both play good cop first. If we do not get what we want, then both of us play bad cop.’ Arjun rang the bell. They heard the echo of the ding dong die out.

They waited.

## FIFTY-SEVEN

There was no response for about fifteen seconds. Arjun was fighting his urge to knock on the door or ring the bell again. Then they heard a man call out from inside, ‘Who is it?’

They exchanged looks once again. Arjun whispered to Kavya, ‘We need to get in first to tell him anything.’

Kavya was not listening to him. She was thinking of what to say to

the man. She knew that she had about two seconds to come up with a decent answer before the man would become suspicious. She had never been in a situation like that before. She has always used the CBI card to get into places she wanted to. She thought of using it even then but she remembered that she was talking to someone who was possibly a party to a fraudulent activity which involved giving away inside trade secrets to other nations. *It would scare him away*, she thought. *Maybe I need a prelude before saying I'm with the CBI.*

‘A friend. Someone who can help you,’ Kavya said out loud.

Kumar stayed silent for a spell and then said, ‘Who the hell are you? I’m not in trouble. I do not need any help.’

‘I know about Snigdha,’ Kavya said. ‘I know you’re hurting. I can help you. I can get you the people who are responsible for what happened to her. I need you to trust me, sir.’ Silence.

Kavya spoke again. ‘I know you will not believe what I’m about to say. I can say with one hundred percent conviction that I want to help you. Right now, I find myself in a similar position as to what you were some months back. You have got to help us sir. We need it.’

No response once again. But Arjun and Kavya heard the sound of footsteps come closer to the door.

‘My name is Kavya Nag. I work with the Economic Offences Division, CBI. I’ve friend whose sister and brother in law have been kidnapped. I need your help, sir. The same people that took your wife away are responsible for it. I know that you know that it was not a mugging gone wrong. I can say that because I know the real reason. Please open the door sir. We really need to talk to you. It is of utmost urgency.’

The sound of the footsteps grew heavier. Then there was a rustling noise as Kumar drew open the curtains of the window beside the door. He switched the porch light on at the same time. The bulb swarmed the porch in yellow and Arjun and Kavya could see Kumar’s head peep from the window. He eyed them for a spell. They looked back at him.

‘I need to see your ID,’ he said as he glared at Kavya.

She dug in the breast pocket of her shirt and produced the blue jacket. She held it against the glass of the locked window. Kumar looked at it with intent for several seconds. He then craned his vision upwards to look at

Kavya's face. He compared the photograph on the ID to the face. Not the best way to check the authenticity of the ID, Kavya thought. Anyone who was even a half decent forger could make something that resembled the real deal. She held her tongue.

Kumar kept staring at the badge. He said, 'What is your ID number?'

'E H dash seven three seven one.'

Kumar held the badge for another beat and then said, 'Hold up.'

He disappeared from the window sill. Arjun and Kavya then heard the latch of the door turn. One mechanical cluck followed by another. Within a second. Then the door opened as it swung inside by some inches.

Kumar peeped out from the narrow gap. 'Are you sure the two of you're alone?'

'Completely positive. We nailed the asses of the three men who were following us thirty minutes back,' Kavya said.

Kumar then uncoiled the final chain level and swung open the door to reveal himself fully. He was forty-five and looked like that. He was on the thinner side and had average height. He was balding from the centre and he tried to cover it by sweeping his hair across his forehead.

Going by the size of the living room, the house must have been massive. Much bigger than what it looked from outside. It was definitely roomier than a normal row house. It was well furnished too. The living room had expensive furniture and state of the art shiny electronic gadgets. It had a long and comfortable looking couch that could easily hold five people who called themselves heavy boned. There were four armchairs and a large and round glass table too. All of them pointed at the mammoth but incredibly thin television set.

The house's heater was set at a cosy and comfortable temperature.

'We are here to help,' Arjun said. 'But for that you need to help us too.'

Arjun and Kavya made themselves comfortable on the cushioned couch. It was not fluffy and they did not sink into. Arjun liked it that way. Kumar looked nervous. His hands were clasped together in half a fist that lay motionless in front of his right thigh. His shoulders hung low and he had two

or three horizontal lines on his forehead. He was wearing a shirt that was size or two larger than his size.

‘Why do you want to help me?’ he said in a flat tone and a weak voice. It almost trailed off towards the end.

‘I’ll be honest here,’ Arjun said. ‘My sister, my brother in law and a dear friend have been kidnapped by the same people who were responsible for your wife, Snigdha’s, death. As ransom, they are asking for evidence that is out there against them. The evidence will put them away for good.

This lady here, as you know, is an intelligence officer. She has been trailing these guys who have caused much loss to us for the past several weeks. She was close to nailing them. She was in fact minutes away from getting the evidence but then the person who was going to give it to her was killed and so she could not get it.

These guys we are up against are relentless. But you already know that, right?’

Arjun did not speak until he heard a murmured affirmation from Kumar. He continued speaking. ‘Now, we know that the person who has the evidence that will nail them is here, right in this house. Am I right?’

Kumar suddenly became alert. He wiped narrow streams of sweat off his forehead. He could feel some more beads of sweat form under his forearms and knees. He said scrappily as he searched for the right words, ‘I need you to leave, please.’

## FIFTY-EIGHT

Kavya got up rapidly. She walked up to Kumar. Urgent steps. She stopped right in front of him. She could feel him breathe. It was heavy and smelled a little of black rum. She held him by his shoulders. Gripped her fingers around the blades and then pressed them firmly. Three times. Then she shook him back and forth as if she was riding a mountain bike on rough terrain.

She stopped shaking him. 'Where is the lawyer, Kumar? Where is Nikita Verma?' she said, looking right into his black eyes. 'You have to help us here. We know you want to but you're afraid what will happen if you do. But you have got to understand the severity of this situation. If you do not tell us, four people will be slaughtered. Four innocent people. Do you want their blood on your hands? We know you felt immense pain when they took away your wife. But this guy here still has a chance to save the people he loves. You have the key to that.'

'I cannot,' Kumar said. 'You do not understand my situation. She's not here. You better leave otherwise...'

Kavya had enough. She nippily moved her left hand from Kumar's shoulder blades to his jaw. She searched for the spot she wanted. It was just above his neck and under his jaw. It was a small spot. Maybe the size of a green pea, but softer. She only used her index finger to look for it. She found it with ease and then applied pressure to it. Not too much, not too less. Just enough. That was the key. She had practiced doing it several times. She had actually done it in real life scenarios only once. But she had nailed the art by doing it on dummies. Within a flash, before Kumar could act or understand, he collapsed forward. Kavya again gripped his shoulders. The arm part on that occasion, not the shoulder blades.

Kumar lost control as he lost his conscious. His entire body weight rallied on Kavya. But again, she coped with it impeccably. She was not the most powerful but she had the best technique. Instead of pushing the motionless body away, she let it fall on her. She guided it sideways by using her arms and her chest. She knelt down as Kumar slid out. She allowed him to land on the ground with a gentle thud. She put one palm at the back of his head to cushion it from the impact.

'He will be gone for at least five minutes. We better hurry in finding our lawyer,' she said.

Arjun was already on the move. He had shuffled up to the edge of the living room and was going in one of the bedrooms. He had halted in the doorway just in case Kavya needed any help.

'Should one of us man the exit? We do not want to lose her now,' Arjun said.

'But two will search the house faster. We need to gamble on one of

the two.'

'Let us both search the house,' Arjun said and then disappeared inside the bedroom.

Kavya called out, 'Good cop now.' Arjun yelled out an affirmation.

It took them a little over three minutes to sweep the entire first floor. They found nothing and decided to move upwards. They stood at the start of the stairway.

'Ms. Verma,' Arjun called out loudly. 'My name is Arjun Parekh and my friend here works with the Economic Offences Division of the CBI. She's exactly the kind of person you want to meet right now. She along with me will do everything we can to get the evidence that is in your possession in the right hands. Please cooperate with us.'

Kavya nudged Arjun in the back. She said in a low voice, 'I'll go up to the third floor. You scan the second.'

Arjun nodded. He yelled again, 'We are coming upstairs. We are not going to harm you. In fact, we are here to take you to safe and secure place.'

They gradually climbed up, step by step. The staircase had a thin but soft carpet on it so it did not make any noise when Arjun knocked around with his cane. He took a right at the stairwell to move to the second floor. Kavya continued her ascend to the third.

There were three bedrooms and two baths on the second floor. All right beside each other in a small lobby. Arjun entered the one on the extreme right. It was completely dark so he searched for the light switch with his hand by standing in the doorframe. He found the switch board and flicked all the buttons on it. Two white CFL bulbs lit up the entire room.

It had a king sized bed in the middle, two large wardrobes by the wall adjacent to the door and a dressing table opposite to it. He panned his vision across the room. Went up to the windows and looked behind the curtains. He even opened the dressing table and saw racks that were stocked with a host of cosmetics. He opened the cupboards and checked under the bed as well.

No sign of Nikita Verma.

He moved to the next two rooms, one by one. Repeated the entire procedure. They had two attached bathrooms which were extremely clean



and had a fragrance of some flower.

No sign of Nikita Verma.

Kavya had less rooms to cover. The top floor was basically a huge attic with a small bath. The attic, she reckoned, might have been used as an in house office by Kumar because it had a desk, two movable chairs, two desktop computers with sleek CPUs and two MacBook Pros. All were connected to chargers on wall sockets.

The attic was completely empty.

Kavya noticed something interesting in one of the corners though. She saw a spread out mattress on the ground. A colourful quilt had gathered in a heap at one of its ends. There was a pillow which was placed vertically against the wooden wall to use as a backrest. A half open book was placed upside down beside it.

There was also an open suitcase some feet away from the mattress. It had several pairs of clothes, two bras and two panties in it. All of the same size. Kavya trotted up to the small bathroom and swung open the door. It made a sharp creaking sound. She turned on the light inside but she did not see anyone. The wash basin had a long strand of hair stuck to it. Black in colour.

No sign of Nikita Verma.

Apart from that strand of hair, maybe.

She moved back down the stairs and joined Arjun who was searching the third room. She said, 'She's not here. Though a woman was definitely staying in the attic. All sorts of things here indicate that.'

At that exact moment, there was a hushed roar downstairs. Or at least that is what Kavya thought. She made a dash for the stairs, nearly tripping over the first step. But then she managed to regain her balance and scamper down the rest of the way.

Kavya screamed out loud. 'Quick. It is the lawyer. She's moving out in a car. Hurry.'

As soon as Arjun heard her, he tossed his cane aside and limped on the stairs on his left leg. He could not move as swiftly as Kavya. He used the railing of the stairway to rally himself as he skipped two steps at a time by swinging down. On reaching the base of the staircase, he saw Kavya gather

pace as she ran out of the main door.

A car engine cracked under the stars and the moon of the dark night. Its voice rumbled as Arjun limped ahead faster, behind Kavya. He saw her far into the lush lawn. She sat in the car and revved its engine. It bellowed and became louder. She looked at Arjun through her window. Arjun was sure that a part of her was contemplating leaving him behind and going after Nikita Verma.

But Kavya waited. Amped the engine up till Arjun got in. He noticed that she was using both her feet. One was on the acceleration pedal while the other on the brake pedal. Pressing both hard. Tense muscles. Equal pressure. She released the brake pedal and their car boomed ahead as if it had a turbo jet propelling it forward.

## FIFTY-NINE

They could see the tail lamps of the car Nikita Verma's was in. It was a block away. A head start of about ten to twelve seconds. Then the tail lamps turned into one of the several lanes. Two heavy breaths later, Kavya swung the car into the same lane. Her driving skills were being used to the fullest. Every vestige of them had to be brought to the fore. She was doing well and had reduced the distance between them to maybe six seconds. That allowed them to keep Nikita Verma in sight.

Arjun glanced at his mobile screen. The countdown timer showed fifty-two more minutes to go.

'We cannot let her get too far away. We would not be able to make it back in time over here,' Arjun said.

Kavya revved the car up even more. The digital tachometer showed a speed of hundred and twenty kilometres per hour. They could feel the resistance of the breeze as they cut through it. The car was powerful and it did not buzz on the road.

A spell passed. Nikita Verma's car was right in front of them. Two seconds away maybe. She was at a clear disadvantage in the pursuit. First,

her car was a 2007 version of the Honda City. Good enough but about twenty percent less powerful than the car Kavya was driving. And number two, she was trying to get away from someone like Kavya, who was a better driver than her.

The road widened some kilometres into their pursuit. That is exactly what Kavya was hoping for. She put in some more kilometres per hour and then throttled to get beside the Honda. Arjun caught the cue and rolled down the window on his side. The wind gushed in with fervour. But Arjun was determined. He ducked out of the window with his neck. Tried to scream into the air. But let alone Nikita Verma, even Kavya who was ten inches beside him could not hear what he was saying. Then he made a timeout sign with his hand as he hopelessly looked at Nikita Verma through his window.

Kavya could have easily derailed Nikita Verma's Honda off course. Just a slight turn to the left and she would've been blown away. Maybe met with a similar fate as the baseball cap man. But Kavya did not do that. She wanted to get the evidence but not hurt anyone in the process.

Then out of nowhere Nikita Verma pulled her car over, right under a street lamp as if there was not enough spotlight on her. At first, Arjun and Kavya thought that she was slowing down to turn into one of the crossroads. But that did not happen. Kavya too brought her car to a halt, some yards in front of Nikita Verma's car.

'Stay behind the wheel. I'll go out and talk to her,' Arjun said. 'This might be a tactic. She might start her car and try to get away if both of his move out together.'

'Here,' Kavya said, as she dug in her pocket for one of the two 9mm cartridges and gave it to Arjun. 'Stay alert,' she said.

Arjun replaced the cartridge in his gun and tucked it inside his pants. Its butt would've been visible to anyone with a vision of above five on six from a distance of a few yards.

He stepped out and turned around. He had seen several photos of Nikita Singh back in her apartment. She looked drastically different. She was almost beyond recognizable. In the photos, her hair was blonde and her skin complexion was quite fair. The woman who was sitting in the car he was staring at had completely turned around her looks. She had dyed her hair dark. She had darkened her skin colour by using loads of makeup. She had

also somehow reduced the size of her eyes by using an eyeliner and puffed up her lips with a lipstick.

Arjun had seen such a sophisticated use of cosmetics only on a set before. Had it not been for that, he was pretty sure that he would not have been able to recognize Nikita Singh.

He stared at her as he thought about her drastic makeover. Then he broke step for her car.

She did not surprise him by suddenly starting it. Instead she opened the door and walked out.

Her right hand was behind her back. Kavya was looking at the entire scene pan out in her rear view mirror. She desperately hoped Arjun would notice the gun in Nikita Singh's hand. She breathed a lot calmly when she saw Arjun feel for his gun as well.

‘I do not want to cause you any harm,’ Nikita Verma said out loud.

‘Neither do I,’ Arjun said promptly.

‘Let us talk it out like real people then.’

‘You’re the one who has a gun hidden behind her back.’

‘You have it in front. Not exactly hidden.’

‘I stay here. You stay there. We can talk with fifteen feet between us.’

Nikita Singh stopped walking. She said, ‘Who are you?’

‘The name is Arjun Parekh. My partner and I need your help.’

‘Why do not you ask her to come out as well? Maybe we can talk then. I do not like it when people are shy like that.’

## SIXTY

Arjun waved his hand twice while he was still looking in front. Kavya picked up his signal and got out of the car as well. She came out with her gun aimed at Nikita Singh. She kept it that way as she joined Arjun's side.

Kavya tossed her badge across by kneeling down. She said, 'Economic Offences Division, CBI. We are the people who will help you.'

Nikita Verma bent down from her knee. Her gaze was fixed on Arjun and Kavya. While still looking at them, her hands searched for the badge which was somewhere on the ground, close to her. She found it after a brief struggle and then glanced at it.

She did not check if Kavya's photo matched in the ID. Instead, she turned to its first page. She seemed to look for something specific from the looks of it. Seconds later, she was satisfied that it was legit.

'This doesn't prove anything,' Nikita Verma said. 'This is a real badge and you're not phony, that is alright. But how do I know that you're not corrupt and getting a piece of the pie?'

Arjun stepped forward. He said, 'If we were corrupted and trying to save our goddamn asses you would've been dead by now and we would've got what we were after. Instead, you're still breathing and cross questioning us. Why the hell would we waste our time to entertain you?'

'Why do you want the evidence?' she asked. 'What do you plan to do with it?'

Arjun and Kavya then told her about everything that had happened since morning. They kept it brief and summed up all the events in five minutes. Nikita Verma listened patiently. She nodded every now and then and also asked yes and no questions wherever she needed clarification. She seemed to believe every word the two said.

'But if you give this to them then they will go free. I cannot let that happen,' Nikita Verma said.

Arjun looked at her in disbelief. Rage bubbled inside him. His grip around the gun tightened.

‘What about the lives that are at stake?’ Kavya asked.

‘If the guilty are not turned in, more instances of a similar nature will happen in the future. More innocent lives would be lost. Also, the corruption will rise exponentially. I’ve gone through all the records that are there with me. A Union Minister is one of the several ring masters. Kailash Saxena. He now wants to run for Prime Minister. I cannot allow this country to be run by that stinking brat. I cannot allow you to negotiate with people who are so in love with wealth that they are risking the lives of millions in this country by sharing trade secrets. I’m sorry.’

‘What if we can do both? Save the lives of our four people that have been kidnapped and then turn in the guilty after that?’ Kavya asked.

‘You and I both know that is not possible. They will vanish and try to kill all of us as soon as they have what they want.’

‘We found you. We nailed three of their guys. We broke through each and every time our backs were against the wall. We have redefined what is not possible. We can do this. We can get our loved ones back and get justice for the guilty.’

Nikita Verma did not respond. She stood absolutely still. Kavya could tell she did not want to lose four lives but at the same time she was being torn while looking at the bigger picture. She stayed quiet too. Nothing she would’ve said would’ve changed Nikita Verma’s mind. It would’ve to come from within. Kavya knew that.

Arjun, on the other hand, was fuming from inside. He could not believe Nikita Verma’s non-cooperation. They had done everything right up until that point. They had figured out all the hard stuff. He found it frustrating that they would’ve to go back with empty hands after everything they had done.

The scream of his sister resounded in his mind. He tried to push it out of his mind. But it was only replaced by Kanaka’s face. Images of her sparkling eyes, the jangle of her waist as she walked and that daisy laugh kept coming back to him. Then all the memories he had of Maria and Rahul rushed in his mind. All the holidays and the fun they had when they made Thanksgiving dinner together. He was suddenly evoked with how he was feeling on the wedding day of Jui and Rahul. They had a whale of a time during their wedding weekend. The three of them, their parents and a couple

of other friends had gone to Barbados for four days.

His chain of thoughts was broken when Kavya put a hand on his shoulder. His body shook with a start.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked him.

Only then did he realized that thin streams of teardrops had trickled down his cheeks. He wiped them with his bare hands and nodded. He could see Nikita Verma standing up ahead in the distance. She was extremely still.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I cannot let my country down like this. I’ve to go. I’ll hand this over to the authorities who will nab the thugs.’

She said that and turned around. Walked awfully slowly as she made her way to her car. Arjun dragged his gun closer to his body.

## SIXTY-ONE

Arjun could have easily taken a shot at Nikita Verma. She had her back to him and Kavya for at least five seconds. But he did not. He was tempted though, but only for a split second. He controlled his emotions and did not allow them to run him.

They saw Nikita Verma get in her car and then drive away past them.

Kavya put a hand around Arjun. She was never lost for words but at that point even she was unsure what to say to him. She patted his back several times and then said, 'Want to go and get those sons of bitches?'

He looked up gradually. He thought it was game over. He nodded his head subtly and then followed Kavya as she shuffled towards their car.

'How much more time do we have?' she said to him as they sat in the car cabin. It was warm inside.

Arjun checked his mobile phone. 'Thirty-one minutes,' he said.

Kavya put the car into gear. Just like before, nothing much was said in the first few minutes of their drive. Both of them were silently trying to devise a plan that they could use half an hour from then.

Arjun looked out through the window. He saw buildings, lamp posts and parked cars skim by into a blur. His mind wandered around. He contemplated on calling Vasu for help. He knew Vasu would agree to help him. It would take him at least fifteen minutes to come to Maria's house. So, he had to decide fast.

Kavya looked straight ahead at the road that was illuminated by the beams of light emanating from the headlamps. She believed in technique. She thought of certain systematic strategic moves. She thought about how she and Arjun can take control of the exchange, how they can get by without handing the evidence over and then how they would escape with four people.

'Any ideas?' she said.

She was driving much slower on the way back. The car was rolling ahead at just over fifty kilometres.



‘I’m calling Vasu. We need more man power.’

Kavya loved the idea. ‘Please do,’ she said. ‘We need someone like him.’

‘What about you?’ Arjun said to Kavya. ‘Is your mind working at its best or does it need another dose of nicotine?’

‘I was thinking of how we could escape unscathed or with minimum damage with four people. Because that is the most challenging part of the entire operation. We can create a small distraction or do something that will temporarily disarm and confuse them but getting away will be the most challenging bit. We have seen it for ourselves. The two men in our boot could not get away. We caught them when they were trying to.’

Arjun nodded in agreement. He said, ‘The same goes for that smug of a lawyer. She stopped on her own but we would’ve nailed her goddamn car had she not.’

‘But we need to work on both the aspects because the second would not come up if we do not fool them in the first place.’

Arjun nodded once more. ‘That’s right,’ he said, ‘Let us divide the work. I’ll think of how we can get past them, and you can think of how we will escape once we have the four people we want.’

Kavya drove ahead. Remained on the right side of the road. She heard Arjun call Vasu and ask him to come to Maria’s house within ten minutes.

As soon as he got off the call, Kavya said, ‘How do you think Maria, Kanaka and Rahul were kidnapped in the first place? Nothing in the house was disturbed.’

Arjun did not answer.

‘Also, they were taken exactly when we stepped out.’

Arjun said, ‘There could have been more people along with the bald guy, the baseball cap and the driver. The others could have gone up after they saw us leave.’

‘They would’ve had to go past the concierge twice. Once alone, and then with three hostages the second time. And the concierge was healthy, not dead if my eyes can still see. So, he must have let them go in and come out voluntarily.’

‘We will look for more entry and exit points into and from his

apartment once we get back there. For now, let us concentrate on our mode of action when the exchange happens.'

Arjun checked his mobile phone.

He said out loud, 'Twenty more minutes to go. They will call anytime now.'

## SIXTY-TWO

Arjun had not got any call by the time they had reached Maria's apartment. Kavya left the car parked on the road, right outside the building's vestibule, blocking more than one fourth of the road.

'Should we let those two still remain in the boot?' Arjun said after getting out.

'Getting them out and dragging them everywhere would eat into our precious time. Let them be. I'll open the boot and check on them once though.' 'They might know something about the place of the exchange.'

Kavya turned around half way in her tracks. She said, 'It would've been changed had they known.'

'Maybe not,' Arjun said. 'It is worth the chance. The place would've been selected after considering a number of factors. It would've been chosen over several other places because it gave them some sort of a tactical advantage. They would be hesitant to change it. Also, they would've known that we would quiz their men. They would've known that they have hired snugs who would break quicker than the window glass of a car. They would've thought that we will rule out whatever they said and look at different places which were strategically similar.' Kavya looked at Arjun.

'It is worth the chance, come on?' he said.

'Okay, let us do this.'

'You do the talking. They are scared of you. Might even piss in their pants after seeing you.'

Kavya opened the boot and a small lamp got switched on automatically which showed the sore faces of the two men. The pain in their ankles would've subsided to some degree but the just about bearable throbbing would've still been there. Arjun and Kavya could also see half dried and sticky blood all over the carpet in the boot.

'There is still room there, in both of your ankles, for one bullet each. You want to see how that feels? It will give company to those that are already inside. They must be feeling lonely. Let us make them happy. Also, you're as

motionless as fat slugs right now. So, I can creep close and take an aim. You would remember that I did not miss from a distance and so I'll certainly not miss it from a couple of centimetres away.'

Both the men were hurting and their bodies were in tatters. Any sort of a response was beyond them. They had lost all hope. But then the human eye always finds a way to communicate and somehow manage to get the emotion across. Whatever it is. Positive or negative. It happens every time. Just like one of those times, even then, at that moment, though both men were in utter shambles emotionally, their eyes fixed themselves on Kavya. It was a subconscious process. Like response to stimuli. Fourth grade, maybe fifth grade science. Though the eyes looked as if every miniscule vestige of sensation had been sucked out from them a few seconds back, they moved just enough to tell Kavya that they did not want any more trouble. For a flash, the eyeballs grew a bigger and they then suddenly shrunk. Kavya caught that change.

'I know you would not want that to happen. You're complete idiots but not silly. Three seconds is all you have to start talking. You know what will happen if you do not. Now answer the question,' Kavya said and then looked at Arjun and jerked her head sideways at the boot.

Arjun stepped forward. He said, 'Tell us where the exchange is going to happen. Where is that place? Why has it been chosen?'

The men remained silent. No movements either. Their eyes did not reveal anything either.

Then there was a flash of light as Kavya shot a blank while aiming at the boot. Both men covered their faces by instinct.

'Speak up,' Arjun said. 'She doesn't give second chances often.'

The baseball cap made a gesture with his hand. He wanted time. He showed his index finger. Held it in front of his head.

'That better be one second,' Kavya said.

'Wait, wait,' the baseball cap said. 'I'll tell you.'

He was mumbling. But Arjun and Kavya could decipher what he was saying.

'But do not hurt me afterwards,' he said. 'I've parents. I've a woman I love.'

‘We would not,’ Arjun said. ‘But tell us what you know. Be honest. Be fast.’

‘I was asked to follow you. To keep an eye on you. Track every movement and report it back.’

‘Back to whom?’ Kavya asked.

‘The boss. We call him Chang.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Nobody knows. He keeps a low profile.’

‘Have you ever met him?’

‘No. But I’ve stayed at his villa once just for a day. It is in Cayman Islands.

He has an entire empire there.’

‘Who is Charlie?’

‘I don’t know but I’ve heard the name before in a conversation. Long back.’ ‘Okay. When and on what did you last update Chang then?’

‘I last spoke to him when we walked out to look where you had gone,’ the baseball said. He took a pause and then said, ‘We had an understanding. If I did not report back to him every thirty minutes he would know that something is wrong.’

Arjun and Kavya looked at each other and then back inside the boot.

Kavya said, ‘What do you know about the place of exchange?’

‘It will be near an airstrip and out of the ambit of any CCTV cameras. The place will be flat. There will be no hiding places and the terrain will ensure there would be no use of any tactical and technological input given by a third person who is not present.’

‘Where do they plan to fly out after the exchange?’ Arjun said.

‘Cayman Islands. That is where Chang goes every week.’

‘Is that his real name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Has there ever been an exchange of a similar nature before this?’ Kavya said.

‘No. No one has been on our trail like this. But there have different types of exchanges before. Like when we give the data about companies here to other foreign firms. They go off smoothly and are often held on airfields itself.’ ‘How do you get such a free access to airfields?’

‘This entire ring of espionage runs deeper than what most people can even fathom. It involves top bosses of different companies. They have their hangers and private jets. No one asks any questions. And even if someone notices anything suspicious, they are bribed heavily. Stacks of greens and keys of German cars are delivered to their houses. It is big racket. Anyone who doesn’t accept the bribe is warned. If that person still doesn’t mind his or her own business then they are done away with for good. But everyone is warned before. Chang’s policy is to engage in talks first and then use the gun if necessary. He thinks He’s ethical but you do not even know how many lives and families he has destroyed.’

‘Why did you join him then?’ Arjun said.

‘Did you not just hear what I said? I had no choice. I was forced to do it. But then the goodies started flowing. My job was just to manage two airstrips here. I get a point five percent commission for every deal they made there. It doesn’t sound to be much but believe you me, these guys deal in figures that no human mind can comprehend.’

Arjun wanted to know more. But then a clock was ticking in his mind. He even thought that he heard a seconds hand tick away inside his head. So, he held tongue and checked his mobile phone.

Nineteen minutes remained for the exchange.

### SIXTY-THREE

The baseball cap told Arjun and Kavya that his name was Raghav. He did not mention a surname so they called him just Raghav.

‘Are you in charge of airstrips here in Pune or someplace elsewhere?’ Arjun said.

‘I can do much better if I can come out and be more comfortable,’

Raghav said.

Arjun and Kavya looked at each other. Only their eyeballs veered. Rapid movement, back and forth. But it revealed a lot. Just like when a midfielder looks up for a flash while dribbling past defenders to check from the edge of his scope of vision if the right winger is free, ready and alert.

In this case, both were ready.

They held Raghav by his shoulders and dragged him out. It was not risky at all. He did not have any weapon on him. His legs were going to be useless for at least the next two weeks. He was defenceless.

Raghav shrieked in pain several times as his feet scraped the surface of the ground. But he tried to keep his volume down for whatever reason. Arjun opened the back seat door with one hand while Kavya bore a major part of Raghav's weight. Arjun went in and pulled him by his shoulders. Kavya pushed him from his knees at the same time. Arjun got out from the other end and then sat in front. Kavya took her seat behind the wheel. Arjun then turned around and aimed his gun at Raghav.

'This doesn't mean anything. This is like a barter. Get it? The old agreement still holds true. You give us what we want and we will do something to not get you killed.'

Raghav mumbled a yes.

'So,' Arjun said, 'The airstrips. Do you look after the ones here in Pune?'

'I do. Two of them. They are makeshift airstrips. Privately owned. Both are close from here. Ten minutes or so at night time from where we are and if we test the upper speed limit of the car.' 'How big are they?' Kavya said.

'One is large. One is small. The small one is mainly used for smaller purposes like while landing and taking off for short flights.'

'And the larger one?'

'Yeah. It has a longer runway which can even be used to land a Boeing 747 in the worst case. But the pilot will have to be skilled and the stars would've to align themselves in the right manner. Otherwise, on normal days, the bigger airstrip can be used to land planes bigger than Cessnas and Diamonds. In fact, Chang uses a Diamond jet to fly to Cayman Islands. He

likes the airstrip I'm talking about. It is big and secure. And more importantly, he feels comfortable over there.'

'Is it a legal taking off strip?' Arjun said. His gun was still firmly aimed at Raghav.

'Yes, it is legit. Officially under the name of this organisation called Lotus Company. Authorised and stamped. It is also listed under the American Air Force emergency landing zones. You may wonder how billion dollar deals with foreign lands and firms are made there then, but you have to understand that the deals are a mere handing over of certain materials. Like any exchange or a handshake. We give them confidential information which is normally in legit looking briefcases and they maintain their end of the promise by giving us money kept in, again, legit looking briefcases. As I said, it is like any other meeting. And since we are talking about the big players here, they nor their planes are ever frisked either. Even if there is going to be a check, we are informed beforehand. Weeks in advance at times.'

After hearing that, Arjun felt that both the distraction and getting away will be equally difficult. Extremely tough. They needed a plan. Quick and fool proof. He said, 'How tight do you think you think the security will be tonight?'

Raghav said after thinking for a spell. 'The bigger airstrip is on a private property. There is a small house there as well along with the airstrip. Walls, CCTVs and guards secure the entire premises. The walls are not too extravagant. Nothing that would raise eyebrows of anyone looking on from outside. From the inside though, there will be guards at strategic places. About a dozen of them.'

'What kinds of guns would they have?' Kavya said. She saw a car pull over in the distance on the right hand side of the road. *Is it Vasu?*

'Automatics. Berettas. Everyone close to Chang uses them. He has some deal with some man in Brazil.'

Arjun's mobile beeped twice. 'Fifteen minutes to go,' he said.

'They have not called yet,' Kavya said.

They saw the silhouette of Vasu's robust figure stride towards the car. His hands moved back and forth. It was the walk of a man with intent. There was something slung across his chest. Something long.



There was silence in the car as he came closer.

‘Who is that guy?’ Raghav said, breaking the silence.

Arjun and Kavya did not respond. Kavya flashed the headlamps, twice. Vasu raised his hand and waved and then he stopped walking. He was still five cars away in front. Kavya started the car and let it glide up to him.

Then Arjun’s phone started ringing.

## SIXTY-FOUR

Kavya stopped the car while it was still some feet away from Vasu. She indicated with an open palm for him to wait. Then she turned back to face Raghav. 'You know what not to do,' she said.

She then leaned forward and looked at Arjun as he answered the call and put the phone on speaker.

Charlie's voice played in the cabin of the car. 'Kalibaug, plot number 17. One o' clock. No games.' The line went dead a flash later.

Arjun felt something in his stomach. Just fourteen more minutes, he told himself. He felt the goose bumps that crept on his arms. He was going into a trance but then Raghav said, 'That place is outside the airstrip I told you about. This is better from your point of view. It is as good as a fortress inside. You have got some chance while engaging with them outside.'

Kavya sensed Arjun's sudden burst of nerves. She was good at that kind of stuff. 'We can do this,' she said to him.

She started the car again and halted it in front of Vasu who swiftly got in. He entered the car from the back seat, from the side where Raghav had placed his head. Vasu sat in as Raghav his agent his entire body closer.

'Is that thing slung across your chest is what I think it is?' Kavya said.

'Assuming you're smart, yes, it is what you think. A sniper,' Vasu said. 'I've also got extra guns, just in case we need them.'

Arjun's face lit up. All worries vanquished from his head. He suddenly felt good about the entire operation. He told Vasu about the phone call as Kavya started for the address of exchange. It was some distance away and they were going to reach it just in time.

After Arjun finished explaining the situation to Vasu, he said, 'We do not have a plan yet.'

Kavya said, 'We can use Vasu as a surprise element. That will work perfectly with his sniper.'

Vasu nodded. He said, 'You will need to drop me hundred yards away if that is the case. Not more, because I'm rusty and not in practice.'

Arjun said, 'Okay. So, you're about hundred yards away and you keep an eye on us from that distance.'

I'll step out of the car along with Kavya. I'll do the talking. We do not have anything to give to them as such, so that is where you come in. Exactly three seconds after I start walking towards the car, you have to start taking down their men with your sniper. Kavya will be by my side and just behind me, right? She will start taking down their people on our left side while you go for the ones in front of me. Our car will shield us from the right.'

'What about the hostages they have?' Vasu said. 'They are goners for sure if we start taking shots at their men.'

'There will be guards with the four of them. That makes sense. You're right, they will harm them.' Arjun said. 'So now you have got to take them out first. Then go for the ones in front of me.'

He paused and gauged everyone's reaction as he panned his eyes inside the cabin. 'I do not have the best aim so I'm not giving myself the responsibility of shooting at someone. But still, I'll look out for anyone who is coming for Kavya. While you two are in action, I'll also toss a gun each over to Maria, Jui, Rahul and Kanaka,' Arjun said and then looked at Vasu, 'How many have you got with you?'

'Two automatic Hitchcock as extras, one Luther for me and my sniper,' Vasu said

'She has taken mine away. That will be one more. So, you have three extras,' Raghav said.

Arjun nodded once more. He said, 'I'll give Maria two. One for each hand. That way he can take care of Jui, Kanaka and Rahul. Plus, one of those three will have a gun too. Once we take shots at their people, they will probably raise some sort of an alarm to call for backup. We will have some seconds before the help arrives. Before that happens, Kavya can swing in to the car and open up the doors to let all of us in.'

'I can stay back. I'll be far away so would not be in danger directly,' Vasu said.

Arjun thought for a spell. He said, 'We cannot let you behind like that for a simple reason. Seconds post our onslaught, they will know that we have

a sniper with us. Once we leave, they will come out searching for you. And then they will grill you till you give them any information on our whereabouts. You will be tortured and then eventually killed. And none of us here want that to happen.'

Arjun paused once more and then said, 'Are you willing to travel in a boot? It is big enough to fit you in.'

'Yes, I would not mind that. It will be like my own personal Jacuzzi,' Vasu said.

Kavya drove on and soon after seven minutes, they were away from the buildings and the red lights. She pulled the car over and got out. Vasu followed suit and they went over behind to the boot and dragged the bald man out and tossed him by the side of the road amid ankle high grass. It did not cover him completely but that coupled with the black of one in the morning, he was away from the sight of any curious passer-by.

'We will send someone for you once this is done,' Kavya said.

'What about that man inside? He's also eating up unnecessary space,' Vasu said. 'We have to carry back six people.'

Kavya thought about it for a flash. She wanted to have Raghav for tactical support of the terrain. But Vasu made sense. She opened the door of the back seat and pulled Raghav by his hands. He shrieked in pain and surprise as Vasu helped Kavya with pushing him on the grass.

'We appreciate your help but we need to let you go here,' Kavya said. 'We will send help as soon as the operation is a success.'

Raghav did not respond. He saw the car roll away up ahead.

'How much more time do we have?' Vasu said after he got inside the car.

'Six minutes. How much time will you require to set up the sniper?'

'One minute.'

SIXTY-FIVE

There was silence inside the car. Each of them was going through their own personal rituals of preparing their bodies and minds for their upcoming venture.

Arjun was hoping to be at the peak of his shooting abilities. He kept on speaking to himself in his mind. Kept on repeating that he will be able to pull out his A game.

Kavya was quietly confident. She backed herself. She knew she thrived in pressure situations. She downright loved to be challenged.

Vasu focused on his breathing and tried to calm himself and his nerves. He knew the importance of being still while pulling the trigger of a sniper.

## SIXTY-SIX

The road leading up to the villa with the airstrip was narrow. Maybe two medium sized cars would've been able to move side by side simultaneously. Their car neared their destination. Its beam illuminated the otherwise dark road. They weren't any streetlamps; just stars, gazing down in the dark. The only other light came from the place they were heading to. They were still several hundred yards away, but they could see the glow of light emanating from it among the thick cover of the green foliage.

The foliage must have to be sparse closer to the airstrip, Arjun thought, for Vasu's sniper to be of any use. It was the most crucial part of their plan and Arjun's heart rate rose as the foliage continued to uniformly increase. But at the same time, he knew the height of the trees would decrease as they got nearer because of airport norms.

While they were still surrounded by trees on either side, they could see the vegetation suddenly disappear in the distance. They could also see a compound wall up ahead. The road leading up to it gradually became narrower to eventually open into a medium sized metal gate. There was a security cabin at the gate on the right side, inside which they could see a burning yellow bulb. There was a short flood light tower on the other side of the gate which had just been started. Only ten to twelve of the seventy odd bulbs in it were beaming down light.

'Okay, slow down here,' Vasu said, as they were metres away from the space void of trees. 'This is the place. I'll get down here and set up my equipment. Three seconds after you start walking towards the car, right?'

Arjun made an acknowledging sound and said, 'Yes, we will get you back in less than five minutes if things go alright.'

Kavya slowed down the car and switched lanes on the narrow road to move completely to the extreme left. Vasu opened the window on his side while the car was still moving ahead. He tossed out the sniper in its case. Then opened the door and held it ajar.

'Now,' Kavya said.

Vasu was a heavy man. Strong and muscular. But he made a low thud

when he landed on grass. He did not hurt himself at all. He did not jump out face down. He leaped outside on his shoulder which was a heap of tight and huge muscles more than anything else. The timing was the key to not feel the pinch of pain and Vasu executed it impeccably.

‘Part one successful,’ Arjun said.

He was tempted to look back and see if Vasu had made it outside in one shape but he curbed his instinct and continued to gape right forward. More bulbs in the floodlight had lit up within fifteen seconds and now he and Kavya could see two cars parked outside the gate, under the light.

One was a sedan which was of the colour of burnt wood. Some luxury car maker. It was shining even though the night was still not particularly well lit. The other car was a van. It looked white and old even from a distance. It was one of those outmoded versions that had sliding doors for passengers at the back.

They could not see any person standing anywhere though.

The speed of their car was in the late twenties. It rolled over the road and got near to the two parked cars.

‘This is it,’ Kavya said as she maintained the pressure on the accelerator pedal.

The floodlights became brighter. Fifty percent of its bulbs were now glowing. They were beating down sheets of white light.

Arjun and Kavya were still hundred metres away when a man got out from the sedan’s back seat. He was wearing a suit. Black in colour and tailor made. He was wearing rimless spectacles over his eyes. They might have been light green. Arjun had seen him somewhere before. His face was extremely familiar.

Two more men got out, this time from the front seat of the van. They had automatic machine guns strapped across their chest. They had one hand on its butt and the other on the trigger. Ready to shoot. They were not shy to make their intent known.

‘Vasu will take care of them,’ Kavya said.

‘I hope so,’ Arjun replied.

Both of them were eyeing every movement that was happening in front of them.

The sedan flashed its headlamps twice when they were about fifty metres away. Kavya brought the car to a pause. She had to ensure that she did not park the car in the line of Vasu's vision. She did it without causing any alarm and raised eyebrows as she gradually turned the steering to the right. She heaved a sigh of relief.

'We can do it,' she said.

'Especially if only two of their men are there to haul us away,'

'I'm sure there are more.'

Those were the last words exchanged inside the car cabin. The two opened the doors in tandem like a well-rehearsed film shot. They stepped out.

At that exact instant, two more men emerged from the sedan's back door. Another came out from the front. All of them had guns strapped across their chests. The same type of gun as the one that was with the two men who had stepped out before.

Then two more emerged from the van. Same guns. Same position.

Nine men in total.

That's when Arjun remembered. The man in the suit was on the security squad of the Union Minister Kailash Saxena.

## SIXTY-SEVEN

The air seemed to move in slow motion. The same was not the case with the chill that spiked Arjun's body. He was up for what was in store but he went puny in the stomach when he saw the space in front of him get packed with men with automatic guns.

That feeling accentuated rapidly when two more people got out. Both were females. They did not have machine guns. They had something even more dangerous tucked in the shoulder holsters that they were wearing. Heckler & Koch P30. Probably the most accurate gun on the planet. Everyone vouched for them.

They did not have silencers attached to their barrels. They did not



need any. They were far away from anyone.

By the time Arjun or Kavya blinked, the two women had their P30s in their hands and aiming at them. Arjun recognized one of the women from Jerry's the previous evening. He suddenly understood what must have happened to Mugdha.

It is easy to spot a P30 from within thirty-forty metres. It has characteristic features. It is extremely sleek for starters. It has a stout butt and appears stunted in stature. Even if the two ladies would've popped it into the side of their bras, only well trained eyes would've been able to spot it. Then its barrel was short. Another key characteristic. It appeared like someone had taken a hammer and chipped its lower end. It was prominent and again screamed P30.

Vasu was looking on as everything unfolded through a magnified lensed eye-hole for him. He knew better than anyone else that the women were carrying P30s. That made them his first targets, in his mind.

Arjun shuffled around the hood and joined Kavya.

The man in the suit stepped forward too. He was tall and thin. Six two and one hundred and eighty. He was white but tanned to the colour of ground coffee. He had wavy hair. Brown and lush. He had no stubble and his lips were narrow. They curled a tad when he smiled to reveal his perfect teeth. He was handsome and had made a killer first impression, even from a distance.

'Why the tension, guys?' he said. His accent was something else. A mixture of different nations. There was some Indians in there too. 'My men are going to swing by and see if you have tried to act funny. OK?

'Not so early,' Kavya said, 'I don't see my people.'

The man broke into a smile once again. 'I see you do not have my stuff either,' he said.

The man perched his lips and jerked his head to the two men in front of the van. They then moved a couple of steps behind and slid open the back doors. Arjun and Kavya watched closely. One more armed man walked out. Then Kanaka followed him. Her mouth was strapped with duct tape and her hands were tied behind her back. Her legs were free. Kanaka was followed by Rahul, Maria and then Jui.

All three were tied and strapped in the same manner.

Arjun felt a sudden surge of emotions sweep all of his insides. He looked at each of them, one by one. He felt overwhelmed. He clenched his fingers into a fist and pressed it hard. The clouds moved casually overhead by a draft of clarity.

‘Your turn now,’ the man in the suit said and threw his arm in their direction.

Arjun looked sideways and found Kavya turning her head to look at him. It was a subtle turn of her neck. She nodded her head undetectably. Arjun got the message. He turned around with his back to the man. He felt for his gun inside his coat. Patted it like it were a cat acting cute. He then took a step forward and started counting three.

*One.*

He moved forward by one more step. Short and slow.

The car’s door was right beside him. One more step sideways and he would’ve reached close enough to open it.

*Two.*

He then limped a few steps to lose time. He took a step sideways. Placed a hand on its handle. Pressed it and swung the door open.

*Three.*

Nothing happened. No shot. No sign of Vasu. *Where is he?* Arjun ducked by bending from his waist.

‘The other bag is by your foot side,’ Kavya said, loud enough for the man in the suit to be able to hear her.

Still nothing.

Arjun searched inside the cabin. He did not know what he was looking for. There was nothing inside apart from impassive air and the metallic smell of dried blood. He gaped between the headrests to try and locate Vasu. But he saw nothing. There was only darkness and a lot of nerves that were piling up swiftly.

Then the first signs of Vasu’s existence showed up. It came in the form of a loud crack in the air from afar. Vasu had fired. His sniper had roared. The bullet screamed through the dry evening air and jolted into the one of the two women’s heads. Brilliant shot.

*And he had said he was not in practice.*

Another loud bang followed a flash of confused silence. The other woman got hit in the face too. Not on the forehead, but her nose and mouth got smashed. It happened inside a second. Vasu had done it, but only after giving them a massive scare. But the job was not over yet. There were still eight men with automatic machine guns looming large and tantalizingly close to the hostages.

That is when Kavya swooped in. She used her skills and her unassailable technique. She always fell back on it. It was like a source of confidence to her. She sent the first bullet into the torso of the man beside Kanaka. He was just moving for his gun when the bullet cut through the air in front of him before landing up in his intestines.

Kavya fired again. Same man and more or less the same spot. He fell to the ground. *Number one gone.*

Number two was standing at the other end, next to Rahul. He was not shot by Kavya because by the time she turned to him he had already fallen to the ground as a result of a sniper's bullet in his heart. Number three was taken down by Kavya. A bullet to the left shoulder. He collapsed on the ground. She needed just one shot. It had been just over three seconds since Vasu had come into play. Everything was happening so quickly. But the man in the suit was aware of all the sudden changes.

*Do not play games,* he had said to Arjun.

That advice had been rammed into the gun's barrel and Arjun and company had built an entire goddamn pitch over there. The suit was not pleased but he knew that he had to stay alive to draw any kind of a revenge. He shuffled back to his car. Large and fast lunges.

He knew that the attention would be off him until his men near the hostages were not dealt with. So, he calculated in his mind. He had about five more seconds before all the eyeballs were going to shift focus on him.

## SIXTY-EIGHT

Five men were still standing. One had shown presence of mind by taking Jui by the waist and then holding her in front of him to use her as a shield. Another man had taken Kanaka by her waist and done something similar. Poor move. Because Kanaka was shorter than him by a foot, at least.

So, his head was visible. And that is exactly what Vasu took apart.

He sent a bullet through his eye that at first rendered him, blind, and then dead the very next moment. Blood spilled all over the ground. It happened so quickly that he would not have realised where the bullet had struck him.

*Number four gone.*

Kavya came into play then. She had gone quiet for slightly less than three seconds. She took an aim for one of the three guards still with the hostages. *Breathe in, breathe out.* She pressed the trigger. Those three seconds had not made her rusty. Not even close to it. She had risen to the occasion as she hit the man's right thigh. Inside part of it. Blood flushed out. Elementary biology, taught in first year of medical school.

*Number five gone.*

Three were still breathing, their hearts were pumping blood to every cell of their body faster than ever before. Two of those three had started firing. The machine guns made a roll and flashed sparks of light as they pumped out bullets. But Kavya and Arjun were up to the task. They had gone behind the fully open door of their car.

A car door is not immune to bullets. But that was Kavya's car. It was fortified with exemplary state of the art bullet proof technologies. Also, the machine gun that was being fired in front of them had soft tips. They had no chance to penetrate through the thick metal, plastics and cushion of the door. The men continued to fire.

Arjun and Kavya could see flashes of light pop up and then disappear equally quickly over the frame of the window. They waited for their turn.

Then the firing stopped.

Silence lulled through all the heat of the gun powder.

The man in the suit must have come out again. He shouted out loudly when he said, 'Each one of you is going to pay badly for this. You have one chance, one last chance to redeem yourself. Come out. My men would not fire. Give me what I want. Take whoever you want and you're good to go. I never offer second chances. I'm being generous here. The offer will expire in the next three seconds. Your friends here will die and then we will come for you to kill you. Get it?'

More silence. It lasted for an entire second.

Arjun whispered as he said, 'Are we going out?'

Then something strange. Their decision was made simpler.

As the man in the suit counted one, they could hear the rumbling of a car engine. It was coming from the only road that led to the airstrip. Arjun and Kavya turned around to see, still behind the door. They saw two beams of headlights at the start of the clear land. The roar of the engine grew louder as the car came closer. The headlamps were on full beam and they brought in a burst of light even though floodlights lit the area.

The man in the suit was distracted and he stopped counting. The car came closer and closer. It was then suddenly brought to a halt. The brakes screeched and even though the acoustics in the area were pathetic, its echo was clear and loud. Arjun and Kavya's view was blocked by the door, so they got up half way and looked over the window sill.

They saw a woman got out of the car. They knew her. They could not believe their eyes.

It was the lawyer – Nikita Verma.

SIXTY-NINE

Arjun held Kavya's hand by her forearm. Pressed it hard. He was relieved but in denial. He wanted to be told that what was panning out in front of him was happening for real. He had absolutely no hope of Nikita

Verma's coming there, at that airstrip.

Nikita Verma stood tall by the side of her door.

'I've what you want,' she said. Her voice had authority. She oozed confidence.

'You bitch,' the man in the suit said.

'Release them first,' Nikita Verma said as she threw an arm towards the four people, gaged and tied.

'Show me the suitcases first. That is how this is going to work.'

Nikita Verma ducked inside the cabin and produced one suitcase. It was of medium weight so she did not have to struggle with it as she placed it on the ground beside her.

'How can I be sure that is what I'm looking for?' the man in the suit called out.

'I knew you would say that,' Nikita Verma replied. 'I'll give you whichever one you want first. You will be satisfied that way that this is the real deal. You have to let go off them if you want the other one.'

The man in the suit looked across at the hostages. He made a gesture with his hand to Nikita Verma for her to throw the suit case in his direction. It made a scrapping noise against the tar road as she slid it across to him.

The man in the suit knelt down and picked up the suitcase. He looked down with half his eyes, while the other half eyed Nikita Verma. It was a basic suitcase. No fancy lock or anything. Just a simple normal latch that was not locked using the key. So, the man could easily open it.

He saw a big blue file inside that had large spirals on the side. He flipped through. His eyes lit up and grew wider.

'We do not have all night,' Nikita Verma said.

The man looked up from the suitcase and back at her. He rose from half a sitting position.

'Where is the other suitcase?' he said loudly.

A gentle breeze picked up, making a flapping noise as it brushed against everyone's clothes.

Nikita Verma again dug in her car through the fully open door. Came back out to produce another similar suitcase.

‘My people now,’ she said.

The man in the suit started walking towards the two guards that were still alive. He took normal steps at a normal pace, not something you would associate with a nervous man.

Arjun and Kavya were eyeing the entire scene unfold from just over the window. The floodlight’s beams were strong at the top left hand corner of the frame but that did not obstruct their view because the hostages were to the right.

The suited man stopped walking as he came near the van. He panned his vision across at all the hostages. The two guards had moved to the side of the car. They had gauged the position of the sniper and positioned themselves in a place where it would be geometrically impossible for Vasu to take a shot at them. Their guns were pointed in Kavya and Arjun’s direction. The other two men, by the sedan, had also moved to the side. They had their guns aimed at Nikita Verma.

The suited man stood still for a spell. He stared at Kanaka first, and then moved his vision to glance at Maria, Jui and Rahul.

Arjun and Kavya were watching closely. Vasu had a close up view through the eye-hole.

What happened next surprise them all.

## SEVENTY

The suited man his agent out his gun with his right hand. He transferred it to his left and again put his right by his thigh to pull out another gun. Both were not identical. The first was a shotgun. The second was a Walther PPK. Arjun and Kavya could not see it from the distance but Vasu had a special close up for him. He recognized it right away.

All the eyeballs were on that man, so when he tossed the gun over to Rahul, no one had noticed that he had broken free from the shackles of his handcuffs. *Or had they been locked in the first place?*

Rahul caught the gun by its butt and then slid sideways in a flash and gripped Jui’s head in his elbow.

Kavya was the first to realize what was happening.

Rahul reformed his grip around Jui's neck. He had impeccable technique. It was evident within a beat to Kavya when he wrapped the back of his elbow around Jui's collar bone.

'Do not move,' Rahul cried out. His voice was loud. It bounced from the air and to the ground and into the ears of Arjun and Kavya.

Then Rahul made a sign with his hand. He crossed both his arms to make a large X. Arjun did not get the sign. Kavya had a vague idea but the person for whom the sign was meant understood it the moment it was made.

Vasu was more than hundred yards away and he relaxed his finger over the trigger of his sniper. He had not seen that sign ever since he had retired from the army. It was a code that yelled back off or we are going to start butchering your men in lay man's terms. He continued looking through the eyehole.

Rahul said again, 'Hey Arjun, you bastard. You think you're smart? Now see them die here, right in front of you. And then we will hunt you after that. You think you could come to my territory and threaten me?'

Everything suddenly fell in its place in Arjun's mind. *The abduction of Maria and Kanaka. Maybe Jui too. Now this. Rahul is Charlie!*

Arjun rose to get up and make a dash towards the van but Kavya held him down. She pressed his arm and whispered, 'Not now. We will find the right moment. But not now.'

Rage burned inside Arjun but he stayed quiet and continued to stand by Kavya.

'Now hand over the other suitcase,' the suited man said. His tone was chillingly calm.

Arjun and Kavya were peeping over by the side of their car. They saw Nikita Verma take a step forward and then walk around the hood of her car. She had the briefcase in her hand. It was light and thus dangled mid-air.

'Give it fast,' the suited man yelled again.

'No more games, no more games,' Rahul said. 'Hand it over. We leave, you leave. No one will remember anything, no one will say anything. Everything would be as it was yesterday.'

Arjun got up then, at that exact moment. He pushed aside Kavya's



hand.

‘Why Rahul? Why?’ he said as he limped for the van. The sitting down had set riveting jolts of crunch upwards through his leg so he was dragging it along the tar.

‘Do not come close, Arjun. I repeat. Do not come closer,’ Rahul said.

Arjun struggled as he tried to walk rapidly. He raised the hand in which he was holding the gun.

That’s when it happened.

Nikita Verma hurled the briefcase in the air and it went spiralling across and over Arjun and a lot of land to thud in front of the van. Almost at the same time, Kavya lunged forward, and said simultaneously, ‘No Arjun. Please.’

Kavya was healthy. No leg issues. Arjun’s three steps were equal to one Kavya leap. She set her feet firm on the ground and then threw herself on Arjun. She dragged him down and stopped him from pulling the trigger.

Vasu was far away, but his mind was present in the thick of all the proceedings. He sensed this was his chance to bat again. He was already looking through the eye hole and his finger was already on the trigger. He squeezed it gently to let loose a death warrant that slammed into the two guards by the sedan, one after the other. Then he waited with a baited breath. Sweat trickled on the mud under him. He continued to wait for the suited man and Rahul to move so that Nikita Singh Adam’s car would no longer be between them.

But they knew that. They did not move, at least not sideways. Instead, they skipped inside the van. Rahul was in two minds, whether he should kill the witnesses or just leave.

The suited man saw Kavya and Nikita Verma blaze towards them. Twenty metres. Ten. They were fast, especially Kavya.

‘No time for that. We need to save our asses,’ the suited man yelled.

Rahul knew his partner was right so he jumped inside the car too.

Kavya and Nikita Verma started firing as soon as he let go of Jui. But most of their bullets hit the corner of the van and other parts where it did not

matter.

Arjun was languishing at the back, near their car. His knee had done him in. He still tried to play a part and be of some use so he reckoned that they would drive the van out of there. He dragged himself, while he had collapsed on the ground, to the middle of the narrow tar road.

But he was wrong.

The suited man and Rahul did not try to go out. Instead, they swung the car right and rammed into the closed gates of the villa. It slammed open and they moved in quickly.

Kavya darted back to their car and pulled Arjun on her way. Made him sit on the back seat and then took the wheel. Nikita Verma took the seat in front, by Kavya. She put one foot on the accelerator and did not let go of it for the next minute.

She followed the rear lamps of the van which was easy to do because there was hardly any other light. The van had got a head start of more than fifteen seconds so it was still far away, though the distance was closing in rapidly.

## SEVENTY-ONE

The night air lulled in silence. Arjun, Kavya and Nikita Verma could see in the distance that the van had come to a halt in a vast open area.

*Chang uses this base to fly out of the country, especially to the Cayman Islands.*

Seconds later, they could see Rahul and the suited man run out of their van. Arjun's car closed in, still hundred metres away.

Rahul and the suited man ran what seemed like a tenth of a mile. They stopped by what seemed like an airplane. Arjun could only see its silhouette. Kavya raised the pressure on the accelerator but the car went at the same speed. Something around one fifty kilometres per hour.

Seventy metres. Fifty. Twenty. Ten.

Kavya used the brake pedal and skid the car into a circle to bring it to an immediate stop. Again, the technique was immaculate. It saved them five seconds at least.

They saw the two men climb into the airplane. It had 'Lotus Company' written under the row of windows. By that time Arjun and Kavya were out of the car, Arjun's knee hurt a lot less. He did not know why. He was not even interested in the why as long as it did not.

He ran behind Kavya. She began shooting erratically and with a blind aim at the aircraft Rahul had stepped in with his associate.

She passed their aircraft but kept running. There was one more single engine plane about thirty metres away. It had the same Lotus Company name under the row of windows. She climbed up the make shift stairs and waited at its landing as Arjun sprawled up too.

'I'm flying this,' Arjun said.

'You cannot, remember your knee?'

'The doctors said no cars, not no aircrafts.'

Kavya remained silent but moved aside to make way for Arjun to sit.

He sat where the pilot was meant to. Kavya took the jump seat beside him.

Rahul had already started his plane. He needed to warm it up just enough to let it burn on the runway. Arjun used a technique he had learnt. *Pull the accelerator and press the brake at the same time. Let the engine rev and let go of the brake when the time is right.* Rahul's plane started slowly but with a massive growl. Arjun did not release the brake just then. His plane was going to propel ahead on the runway, much faster than Rahul's if he did it right.

'They are flying a Diamond single engine. The fuel tanks are in the wings. But we are going to go for the propeller which are under them on the front side. Don't miss the aim. Even an error of an inch and the fuel tank in the wings will be hit. The plane would blow up. We cannot afford that, because I want them alive,' Arjun said.

'Propellers on both the wings?'

'Yes, it is some maintaining balance thing. Disable the propellers on one side completely by shooting at them.'

'That will take five to six shots. We're in luck. I've only seven bullets remaining.'

'I'm going to let go off the brake. We will go at a tremendous speed. Hit the propeller on our side then take the other side down when we are airborne. We are hitting their right wing, so the weight on the left will eventually make the plane drift to the left. Physics.'

Arjun breathed in heavily. 'Okay now,' he said. 'Three, two, one, go,' he said.

They lunged forward. Both felt an aggressive pull backwards. Kavya had never experienced something like that before. But she had only seconds before she could hit the plane's propellers.

'Do it,' Arjun shouted amid the roar of the engine.

The plane shot forward at an incredible pace. Seemed like magic, but it was a result of fifteen hundred cubic inches pushing forward thousand kilograms of duralumin. Kavya took a second and a half to recover from the sudden recoil. That was all she could afford. One picosecond more and she would've missed out taking the propeller down.

She readied herself by holding the gun properly even while she was in recoil.

*Technique. Utmost precision.*

Her right hand packed itself under the butt and the index finger gently wrapped itself around the lower part of the muscle. The left hand, her strong hand, supported the right with its index finger held against the cold trigger, ready to squeeze it anytime.

Anytime was half a second later.

Rahul's plane was right next to them. Kavya would've been able to see him through the windows but she was focusing somewhere else. She was calculating an estimate of the size of each propeller on the wing. She did it inside a picosecond. Squeezed the trigger.

She missed her target. *Buck up. No failure.* She tried again. Hit the propeller on the extreme edge. But that was good enough. She went in again. This time, she hit it bang in the middle.

'Great,' Arjun said.

The plan was to disable the propellers on the right before they were airborne. The planes were nearing the speeds at which they could take off. Maybe four more seconds. Kavya had that much time to gauge and take a shot. She steadied herself. Focused on keeping her fingers still. Her eyes became hawk like and she squeezed the trigger the fourth time.

She hit once again.

Arjun kept toggling his vision between the speedometer and the side. He raised his hand for high five and yelled a loud 'OH YES' when the propellers on the right became dysfunctional. But it was still rotating, only slower than how it would have otherwise.

'Now we must wait,' he said. 'They will start drifting ever so lightly inside half a minute.'

The planes hit the air, almost together. The Diamond went off first. Beats later, the Cessna followed suit. The Diamond soared high straightaway. Arjun kept the Cessna low. He used the joystick to take it to the other side. Twenty seconds passed. The Diamond began to sway to one side. It was a subtle shift. No one who was not looking for it would've noticed. Then the Cessna began its ascend. It was a quick transition from one thousand feet to

three and a half thousand feet. It glided over the Diamond.

Kavya had her task cut out once again. She looked down. Saw the lights on the wings. They were red because they were on the right wing. They blinked fast. They gave her an idea of the wing span and the wing length. All she could see was darkness underneath, but then the lights gave her a sense of direction.

She readied herself once more.

Three bullets left.

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

She squeezed the trigger once more. The bullet screamed out. Target missed. But it might have scraped the fuel tank. She steadied herself and then squeezed two more times and two more bullets pummelled out. One after the other, one second apart.

The first hit the corner of the propeller on the left and the second hit the second hit more towards the middle. Both the propellers were damaged and the plane's speed was affected. Also, the fuel tank was dripping out. Slowly, but steadily.

## SEVENTY-TWO

All Arjun and Kavya could do was wait. It was going to take Rahul's plane about ten minutes to run out of fuel. They knew that Rahul and the suited man would know that. But that was not going to help them in any way.

Rahul still had the option of doing an emergency landing on the land or in the water. The Hudson was close by, but that would be suicide. Rahul was not skilled enough to land on water to let luck run its course.

They could have landed on mud or ground and maybe Rahul was thinking about it because he turned east, towards the open lands and away from Pune.

Arjun followed them from a distance. The kind of distance where a golfer would've to use a driver to reach, but at the same time it was close enough for the spectators to recognize who the golfer is.

In the meantime, Kavya contacted her chief and Abu Farooq. She had them on for a conference call for slightly more than four minutes and told them exactly what to do.

Soon, the space around the two planes was flocked with five helicopters. They did belong to the Indian Air Force. They had been asked to get the men in the Diamond alive. But at the same time, under outstanding circumstances, they could bring down the plane or kill the men or both together.

The Diamond's engine started to let go eight minutes after the fuel tank had been ruptured. It glided down, making no sound whatsoever. Its engine had died completely. Rahul and the suited man knew their fate. They had first heard the choppers and then seen them. The Diamond did not crash. Rahul exhibited his emergency landing skills when it landed on a wide road which would've qualified as a highway had it not been for government norms.

Arjun was not sure about his emergency landing skills so he circled the area at a low height.

The choppers circled the Diamond when it reached the ground. Air Force personnel ran out and cordoned off the area which was lit up by large lights attached on the four choppers.

Arjun and Kavya could see their ant like figures moving back and forth at a brisk pace.

After a while of no activity inside the Diamond, they saw two figures emerge out. Charlie and Chang. They had their hands on their heads. Rahul and the suited man were handcuffed on the spot and then rushed into one of the five choppers.

Arjun then followed the choppers to an army airbase some kilometres away. He kept glancing at Kavya. He was not able to believe that they had pulled it off. They landed thirty-five minutes later, on a proper runway with proper indicator lights.

In the meantime, Vasu had driven Maria, Jui and Kanaka to safety. He was going to take them to a hospital but all three of them insisted that they wanted to meet Arjun and Kavya, the two people who had saved their lives. Vasu drove down to the air force base. They reached just minutes before Arjun landed the aircraft and they could see its flickering lights gradually glide down.

Arjun and Kavya were not able to step out of the airstrip immediately. They were taken to a small room where a doctor checked all their vitals. Both had a high heart rate but the doctor realised it was just the adrenaline and nothing serious. Arjun also asked for a painkiller and the doctor obliged by sticking a needle in his arm.

Then he let them go.

The two marched, Arjun slightly slowly even though he swore its effect was already showing up. The airstrip had a small flat structure which comprised of many rooms and a main central lobby. Its door sucked open automatically when Arjun and Kavya were inches away from it. They walked into the lobby and found Jui, Maria and Kanaka sitting inside on a metal bench. They rose from their seats as soon as they saw Arjun and Kavya. Both rushed towards one another with wide open arms.

Jui ran forward, with tears streaming down her cheeks. She put her arms around Arjun who already had his open.

‘I was scared I would die. I love you so much,’ whispered Jui as she



hugged her brother.

‘I wouldn’t have let that happen,’ Arjun said.

He opened his eyes and saw Maria and Kanaka in a blur. Maria gave him a thumbs up and then he and Kanaka walked over to Kavya.

‘You bastard! Now I owe you one,’ Maria said to him and then went in for fist pump and a handshake and then a full-fledged hug.

When Arjun walked towards Kanaka, he felt his insides rivet more than they had when he had started the airplane. He suddenly went weak in his knees and more tears streamed down from his eyes. Kanaka took a few small and shy steps towards him.

‘Jay,’ she said, her voice was nearly breaking. ‘I really want to thank...’

He put a finger on her parted lips. ‘You do not need to say anything,’ he said and then took a pause. ‘You just have to promise me one thing. Please smile, always.’

Kanaka’s lips curled coy. ‘Is that it? Because I do not see this smile going away any time soon.’

‘Actually,’ Arjun said, ‘there is one more thing. Remember that date we were going to have tonight? I really apologize for not being able to make it today. Can we reschedule, please?’

Kanaka rolled her eyes and her beautiful lashes. ‘Let me consider,’ she said and then stood on her toes as she leaned forward.

Arjun leaned forward too, and kissed Kanaka hard. He felt his heart beat loudly. He was sure she could hear it too. But just then he heard her heart thud away too.

It was four in the morning and all of them had a late dinner at a *dhaba* which was willing to let them in. All of them had forgotten about the previous day for that small period. There were smiles, tears and laughs and some stale bread and hot and delicious soup. They walked out of the diner and saw in front of them the most beautiful sunrise that they had ever seen.

## SEVENTY-THREE

*One month later at an unknown location*

Arjun rose from his bed, pushing through the quilt. His eyes fell on the vacant space beside him. There was the quilt that Kanaka used. It lay in a heap and smelled like her. *Kiwi shampoo*.

He sat silently on the bed with his legs down. Then stepped out of the room after splashing cold water on his face and brushing his teeth. He stood in the doorframe of the room and observed Kanaka as her elegant body swept the floor, moving from the living room to the kitchen.

‘I heard you wake up,’ she said. She shot him her green smile.

Arjun walked up to her and held her by the waist. Pulled her close and leaned in to kiss her. Kanaka must have just applied some lip balm because she tasted like fresh vanilla.

She pulled out and whispered, ‘I want to continue but the pancakes need to be flipped.’

‘I like them slightly burnt and brown,’ Arjun said and again leaned in as he gently massaged the base of her neck by sending a hand through her dark curls.

Twenty seconds later, there was a rap on the door.

Arjun and Kanaka pulled out simultaneously and shot quizzical glances at each other.

‘It is eight thirty in the morning. Why?’ Arjun said, as he hesitantly turned away from Kanaka and ambled towards the door. He looked through the clean eye hole and saw Kavya standing on the other side. He had not seen her for nearly a month. She looked different. Her hair was shorter and it had even been dyed deep maroon. He opened the door.

‘Good morning,’ Kavya said. She sounded different too, a lot more relaxed than he could previously remember.

Arjun greeted her with a hug and stepped away from the door to let her come inside. He noticed she was carrying a large purse.

‘I’ve got some breakfast,’ she said. ‘I came unannounced so figured that I would be intruding on your plans.’

‘It’s okay,’ Kanaka said as she found a cosy spot on the rocking chair in the living room. Arjun sat on an armchair beside her. Kavya sat right in the centre of the couch, facing them.

‘I finished compiling the final report of the entire scandal last night. Two billion dollars. That’s how much it was worth. Dozens of multinational companies, several politicians including our Union Minister Kailash Saxena and at least fifty employees of various organisations were involved.’

‘Employees like Manoj?’ Kanaka asked.

‘Yes,’ Kavya said. ‘All were desperate in some or the other way like him. We found out that Manoj had struck some deal with Lotus Company when he came to work here in India. He was supposed to start shelling out information two years after he got here in exchange for the job they gave him.’

Kavya took a long pause. She turned from her waist to face Arjun. ‘About Rahul,’ she said. ‘Can I tell you something?’

Kanaka jerked her rocking chair closer to Arjun and locked her arm in his. He nodded his head subtly.

‘He was one of the ringmasters. One of the top bosses of Lotus Company. That’s why he travelled so much to go back and forth and ensure everything went off smoothly. He directly reported to Kailash Saxena, the Union

Minister.’

‘I hope they both rot in hell,’ Arjun said.

‘I can ensure they rot in the next worst thing. We have a water-tight case against everyone involved thanks to the papers in the two suitcases that Nikita Verma gave us. Lots in there to prove a money link between various companies and Lotus Company. The papers also contain sensitive company data worth hundreds of millions.’

Arjun rose from his seat and broke step for the kitchen. He called out on his way, ‘Want some pancakes?’

‘I’ve got some pizza too,’ Kavya replied.

‘For breakfast?’

‘Why not?’

Kanaka got up too and set three plates at the dining table.

‘How’s your job hunt going?’ Kavya said to Arjun, as they devoured on the food.

‘Not promising. I did a voiceover for a show two weeks back but nothing else. Also, the doctors believe that the knee is permanently damaged now. So, I cannot go faster than a decently quick jog.’

‘What are your plans now?’ Kavya asked, leaning forward on the round dining table. Her forearms rested on its surface.

‘Well, I was thinking of going back to the UK and try to see if I can dig some contacts that will help me get a decent role somewhere. Not the most inspiring thing to say, but I’ll stay with my parents to cut down on the rent costs. At least for the next six months.’ Arjun paused and then briefly glanced at Kanaka. ‘Also, she will leave for medical school next week.’

The three ate silently and then Kavya got up to leave. She shook hands with Kanaka and Arjun.

‘It was a pleasure,’ she said and turned around to face the door.

‘Oh wait,’ she said, taking a step back to join Arjun by his left elbow. ‘I’ve been asked to give you this,’ she said and dug in her purse. She produced a plain white envelope. She handed it over to Arjun and said, ‘Follow the procedure inside if you agree.’

Arjun was confused. He started opening it, but then Kavya placed a hand on his hand and said, ‘After I leave, please.’ She left without saying another word.

Kanaka stood beside Arjun as he tore the envelope’s flap and took out a single sheet of paper. It was a letter addressed to him. He read it in his mind. He did not believe what it said.

He whispered, ‘I’ve been offered a place in a special task force in Mumbai.’

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you so much to all those who supported me in this endeavour. I will forever be grateful. Special thanks to Chaitanya Gokhale who designed the first cover of this book. Also, many thanks to Nisha Date who sat with me through the editing of this book. My heartfelt gratitude to Abhiram Bhalerao, Mrunal Bhosale, Priti Deshpande, Sonali Gokhale and Chaitanya Gokhale for providing invaluable inputs as beta readers.