

The Stolen **Buddha**

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**To my two loving sons
Aditya and Siddharth whose love for my stories,
tales and anecdotes have remained
undiminished over the years.**

About the Author



The author is a doctor and presently a professor of Community Medicine in a medical college in India. Moved by a passionate love to serve mankind, he left his teaching job in the year 2001 to work in the villages and Hard to Reach Areas and made a significant contribution to the Polio Eradication Initiative, working as a Surveillance Medical Officer of the World Health Organisation for nine years. Polio was eliminated from India in the year 2011 and certified as such in 2013. Later he was deputed in National AIDS Control Organisation at the state level as Additional Project Director for another three years. Thereafter, he returned to his teaching position in his parent department.

Despite his busy schedule and his share of worries, his love for reading and occasional writing remained undiminished over the years. He describes himself as a professor during the day and in the evening twilight zone, a dreamer, a writer and an author who pierces and unravels the matrix of existence to dwell in the world of creative imagination.

On a personal trip to Sikkim in the year 2014, as he lumbered through the hills and valleys beside the roaring Teesta River, this story suddenly crystallised in his mind in the form of visual images. It took him more than seven years to pen down his story, halting occasionally due to his busy work schedule, frequent travels and a near fatal road traffic accident. Back on his feet and with his love for writing rekindled, he set out to complete his journey with the characters of his gripping and unputdownable novel.

In the domain of fictional writing, he is a ventriloquist, a puppet master and a one man band. A virtuoso, who loves to bring together ordinary and fantastic characters that move effortlessly among others, weaving stories that are compelling, captivating, provocative, puzzling and intriguing.

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Chapter 1:

The Story Begins



As Mr Lee swipes the entry card to open the door of his hotel room, he has an uneasy feeling creeping up his spine. He waves it aside and enters slowly inserting the card into its designated slot on the wall just next to him to light up the room.

There, right in front of him on the sofa was his colleague Zhang, staring at him.

“How come you’re here?” asks a startled Lee, his voice trembling.

“Our boss is very unhappy with you and what you’ve done and so am I”, replied Zhang. “You shouldn’t have done what you did. In our organisation trust is of utmost importance.” Zhang was known for his verbal brevity and muscular ruthlessness.

Lee knew well that he couldn’t escape from this booby trap in this limited space and it would be dangerous, probably fatal, if he called out for help or moved a muscle. Zhang calmly took out a pistol with a silencer fitted on to it and shot twice. The second shot hit Lee right between his eyebrows and he slumped slowly to the floor. Zhang got up from the sofa, as if he had all the time in the world, took out a small box from a metal safe inside a wooden almirah on his right side after unlocking it and put it deftly in his bag.

Before leaving the room, he fished out his mobile phone from his breast pocket, clicked a picture of Lee’s face

downwards on the carpet with blood splattered all around him and spoke to someone on the other end.

“Consignment received”, he said and hung up.

A WEEK LATER.....

A restaurant in downtown Shanghai. Five people are eating leisurely with a drink in between. An attractive pole dancer watches them seductively as she dances sinuously holding a firm vertical polished brass pole with her dainty hands and twirling around it.

“Lee shouldn’t have done it”, said the oldest of the lot, Mr. Ho, peering through his thick-rimmed glasses. “I really loved him.” A little grey at his sideburns, his face was without a trace of emotion under his clean white hat.

The second in command, Zhang interjected. “He wanted to keep the idol, sell it off sometime later and run away with the dough. We obviously cannot let that happen. In our organisation, mutual trust and support are of utmost importance. As they say in South Africa, “Ubuntu”,.....‘I am, because we are’.

Outside the restaurant, a white coloured ice-cream van is parked, as if for no one. Inside the van are two officials of the Chinese Intelligence Service, with electronic equipments and digital screens in every possible nook and corner, trying to pick up the sounds and voices and visuals from inside the restaurant where they had planted their wireless microphones and spy cameras.

For the last one year, they were trying to make headway into a Chinese international gang who had specialised in pilfering and seamlessly transporting their stolen booty beyond their borders and auctioning rare and expensive ancient idols of historical importance around the world. This was their defining moment. They were all ears. Their first lead in two

years was the unnatural death of Mr Lee in the hotel. They knew for sure they were on the right track. If they picked up the signals, they could crack the case this time. There was a lurking suspicion that the organisation was planning something big, really big. The death of Lee in his hotel room was just the beginning. They had CCTV footage in their archives showing Lee in a screenshot carrying a bag in an ancient Ganesha temple in Indonesia, where a historic rock cut idol had gone missing. Two months later, it had surfaced in a famed auction house in Amsterdam.

“India”? Did they hear the word properly? Were these people planning something in India? They became a little restless. The voices they were hearing became a little muffled occasionally.

The intelligence officials felt that they needed backup support to nab the culprits this time. They called up their headquarters, but then it would take at least half an hour for their specialised Ambush Team to arrive. They knew that they couldn't do it alone. They needed backup, and they needed it fast. But then, they had no option but to wait apprehensively, as this was the so called 'Rush Hour'.

As per the protocol, Mr. Honever discussed his plans in a public place. He asked all to meet again at their 'designated' site, at the 'designated' hour. The group left the restaurant in three different cars, all fitted with black glass panels. The cameras on the van started clicking their every move. As the cars hissed into action, the ice-cream van moved too. The van followed them at a distance of about fifty metres, but at an intersection, the three cars suddenly split up and moved apart in three different directions. The van had no option but to follow one of the cars. It followed the big and the most expensive car among the three. It was a black Sports Utility Vehicle or SUV, expecting the kingpin and his aide to be ensconced in it.

As a standard protocol, the gang would invariably split up and take different routes after a meeting each time. At an intersection, the big black SUV took a sharp turn to the left. The ice-cream van was in a different driving lane and had difficulty in changing lanes with other cars only inches away on either side. The intelligence officers didn't want to fix a red beacon light on the roof of the car and blow the police siren. The moment they got some space, the van lunged to the left, as the bystanders beyond the walkway jumped out of the way cursing it. The SUV snaked its way forward, changing lanes frequently. It was evident that they had suspected that they were being followed by the police. The police van followed the vehicle swiftly and surely.

"Can your CCTV cameras pick up a black SUV with darkened glass panes ahead of our van?" asked the van driver over his wireless to the Traffic Headquarters surveillance official monitoring that traffic zone online.

"Yes", came a terse reply.

"Please ensure that the red light at the next intersection remains on for an additional twenty seconds to stop all vehicles. We have to nab them there", requested the van driver. The black SUV shifted to the left lane of the road and all of a sudden, entered a small narrow lane on the left with waste trash bins lined up on both sides. The van had no option but to somehow shift lanes as fast as it could and enter the narrow lane on the left accidentally hitting a waste bin at its very entrance.

"Shit!Remove the bin to a side," yelled the van driver. An officer opened the back door, rolled the bin to one side and jumped back in. By this time, the SUV had exited the narrow lane and turned right. The van followed the SUV like a famished leopard chasing a terrified wild pig in a forest. A family of three with a perambulator carrying their childwere

crossing the street at a zebra crossing ahead. The family froze, least expecting a large SUV speeding like a bullet towards them. The vehicle missed them by only a few inches and rushed on jumping the red traffic light. The van was behind, about sixty metres from where the family stood. It screeched to a halt within two feet of the frozen and petrified family.

“Move on,” shouted the driver. “We’re the police.”

The incredulous family looked at the ice cream van with a strange combination of shock, fear and amazement at the scene that was unfolding in front of them.

“Move on,” the van driver yelled again, as the linear distance between the two vehicles began to widen. The intelligence officials saw the SUV turn right at the next intersection and head towards the Ningbo Zhoushan port. By the time they reached the next intersection at breakneck speed, the ice cream van was halted by a traffic policeman who was furious that he was unable to stop the earlier fleeing SUV.

“Step out please,” said the traffic police constable.

“Don’t stop us. We’re the police from the Special Branch,” yelled the driver flashing his police department ID card. “We’re following that vehicle.”

The constable motioned the cars coming from the western end to stop despite the green signal and helped the ice cream van move on. But the delay was fatal. The large black SUV was now nowhere in sight. Where was it?

The SUV that the van was following drove on and finally stopped for a very brief moment after entering the Ningbo Zhoushan port, then turned right towards the container lodgement area and disappeared into one of the large containers parked there whose side door was open.

Chapter 2: The Onyx Buddha



TWO WEEKS LATER.....

Four Chinese tourists disembark at the Indira Gandhi International airport in New Delhi, India.

“Do you have anything to declare?” asked an airport official.

“No”, they all replied.

That was obvious. Their consignment was arriving separately through a courier service.

Their local contact, Dr. Chan, a dentist who had specialised in implantology, maxillofacial and reconstructive surgery and practicing in an upmarket clinic in New Delhi, was standing at the arrival area with a placard to receive them. The four tourists looked like backpacker tourists as they arrived at the exit point. Faded jeans, collarless white T-shirts with nothing printed on them, a large baggage hung on their backs, a white cap and dark goggles. They boarded a taxi, an air-conditioned Maruti Suzuki van near Tower number 19 that departed from the airport at a leisurely pace. No one said a word. Stoic silence prevailed.

“I hope all arrangements are in place”, finally interjected Zhang sitting on the back seat after the vehicle had passed the police verification booth at the exit point of the airport.

Dr. Chan nodded. He said, “It’ll be better if we discuss this in our native tongue, Mandarin.”

“You all will be lodged in a small hotel in Paharganj near the main Railway station and not in my residence as discussed earlier,” he continued. He looked at them hard, staring right into their eyes.

“You see my son was recently involved in a road traffic accident. A small child died because of that accident and the case is still under police investigation. I’m already under the scanner. The police have said that they may drop in at my residence at any moment.”

“Plans should not change. We never change our plans. The risk is too great. But in this case, we will go ahead with your arrangement, provided you certify that the hotel is safe”, said Lin.

“The hotel is safe and clean. Its owner is a childhood friend of mine. We studied in the same school, in the same class, same section. I have told him that the four tourists, who are arriving today to proceed to the famed Buddhist pilgrimage centre in Sarnath in the state of Uttar Pradesh, are personally known to me. It is all set. There is nothing to worry at all”, explained Dr. Chan.

“Ok”, said Hong Tao. “It’s your responsibility. Should anything go wrong, we’ll take care of you doctor. We’ll slit your throat, right here in Delhi,” his voice steely, his face emotionless. They were conversing in their local tongue as the disinterested driver looked away.

The fourth tourist, an apparently demure and petite lady was watching them silently. Her face was impassive and there was something unsettling in the way she looked at Dr. Chan.

In Paharganj, they checked into a hotel frequented by tourist backpackers from abroad. Their presence did not raise any eyebrows. Dr. Chan asked his friend, a ‘Sardar’, Sikh gentleman wearing a turban, to make them comfortable. He

told him that they would be staying for a period of two days only and specified the kind of food that would be served to them from a nearby Chinese restaurant.

Their 'consignment' arrived at the hotel the very next morning. It was a package, about two cubic feet in volume and marked "Medical equipment- Handle with Care." Dr. Chan personally collected it from his clinic and handed it over to them after repackaging it in a plastic bag.

That afternoon they took a three-wheeler taxi and went to the Delhi Museum. Each wore a white cap with goggles and one of them had a small video camera in his hand. Their caps had Chinese calligraphy on the front and their white T-shirts and loose white pyjama like trousers distinguished them from the others. They were clicking pictures with their mobiles and video graphing with their camera at each point. Their job had begun in real earnest.

Their object of interest was a small idol of Lord Buddha, about six inches tall, carved out of a single piece of onyx that once adorned a quaint household temple for almost a thousand years in a remote village in Sikkim. It was a family heirloom that had once been stolen from their household temple by a local thief, but was recovered a week later by the police. At the request of the government officials to ensure its safety, the family had reluctantly decided to hand it over to the Government of India. Since then, it adorned the high security central hall on the second floor of the Delhi Museum.

The four 'tourists' meekly followed the tourist guide video graphing the pathway in particular. At the entrance, a sentry asked them to deposit their camera and mobile phones at the counter and take a receipt for the same. The camera and their mobile phones were deposited as requested and they moved on with their group. All the Chinese tourists carried pens in their breast pockets. They switched on the concealed cameras

fitted in these pens. When they reached the second floor, they left the tourist group to photograph a black Buddha idol in particular, placed centrally in the spacious hall. This idol was made not in India, but in China, sometime in the fourth or fifth century CE.

This was one of the most secure halls in the whole building. There were sensors all around which guided the video cameras fitted at a height, including thermal cameras at all strategic locations. There were also a few infra-red cameras guided by laser beams beyond the visual spectrum. Touch sensors on the floor also guided the cameras. Wind flow and wind turbulence detectors detected any movement that evaded the other sensors.

The ‘tourists’ were specialists in their own domain. Their eyes were trained to seek at strategic locations the different kinds of detectors and cameras. This information was critical to them to formulate a plan to steal the ancient Buddha idol made of onyx; they had come seeking all the way from their homeland.

The team leader stayed back to admire the centrally placed Buddha idol while the others re-joined and moved on with the group. One of the group members said something and moved into an adjoining washroom to seek or explore an escape route through the toilet window. This window faced a parking lot beyond which were a few shops that offered snacks and drinks to the visitors outside the boundary. Beyond these, at a certain distance, was a row of shops selling antiques of different states. Some of these shops sold items of the seven north-eastern states of India. This was a good escape route. But first they needed to get acquainted with one of the shopkeepers and then explore the area thoroughly before finalising their plans which obviously had to be technically cleared by the team leader.

Back in the hotel in Paharganj, their back-up supplies which had reached included their new passports, visas and four sets of special clothes and anaesthetic equipment and chemicals, wires, ropes, cash in Indian currency, et cetera. In their laptop, they had a computer simulation programme in which they could visually recreate the entire event they were planning and explore the flaws in their plans to pilfer the onyx idol of the Buddha. The programme was specifically designed to look like a computer game to avoid detection of their plans, should they happen to lose their laptop on the way or should the police check the laptop contents based on any suspicion on their way back.

Their biggest constraint was time. They had a small window period and a minor framework to complete their complex task in an extra vigilant environment and escape undetected.

“Our window of opportunity is small”, said Zhang. “The plan has to be fool proof technically.”

Hong Tao laid down the plan while Ms. Mei, the petit lady, entered the data onto her laptop as the graphics started becoming alive on her laptop screen. The sequence of events had been individually defined and stated by Hong Tao. Then, they had to go through the entire sequence with clockwork precision and were timed on their wristwatches with low sounding alarms set at defined intervals. All wristwatches were synchronised prior to the data entry. The entire sequence of events was rehearsed until they reached the Buddha idol made of onyx in cyberspace.

Chapter 3:

The Dragons Strike



That evening they had an early supper. Most of them were quiet throughout the meal, reviewing and revising each step of the plan both in a staccato manner as well as seamlessly. They did not call a radio taxi, but took an auto rickshaw instead. They did not want their movement tracked in any way or linked to their credit cards or a web portal in any way. They had initially planned to get down near an office of a ministry and walk across the road to the museum, but changed their plan as that could arouse suspicion. Nobody gets down near a government office gate late in the evening with backpacks.

The hired auto rickshaw dropped them off at a point near a row of small shops. They had spoken little on the way. With the auto rickshaw driver, they spoke in English and paid whatever he demanded without a question, indicating that they were new to the area.

As the hired vehicle disappeared in the maze of vehicles ahead in the dimming twilight zone, they entered an antique shop they had earlier planned to visit. The time was 9:30 pm. Zhang started looking at the antiques through the glass panes showcasing them. He engaged the attention of the shopkeeper while the others dropped their backpacks over the boundary wall of the museum. This point on the road was relatively dark, as the streetlight was not functioning. They did not arouse any suspicion. Zhang entered the shop and purchased a 'Gorkha' knife. The shopkeeper spoke at length about the history of these knives. The Gorkha knife or 'Khukri'

originated in India in the medieval period and is used as a weapon as well as a tool in Nepal and India even to this day”, he said. “It was used by the Gorkha regiment both in the First and the Second World Wars.” But Zhang was hardly listening. He paid in dollars, which the shopkeeper was too happy to accept and departed as soon as he had come. Walking slowly beyond the shop, he threw his backpack across the wall and quickly jumped and disappeared beyond the boundary wall like a trained high jump athlete.

His mates were waiting for him in the bushes. This light deficient zone was a boon. A little beyond this zone however had thermal cameras fitted at strategic locations and they knew it. They had studied the area before and were battle ready. They opened their bags and took out their dress to camouflage themselves and avoid any thermal images. Hong Tao fired a rope with a hook upwards, which attached itself to the parapet wall on the roof. His job was to head for the roof and break into the glass dome that would give him access to the third-floor auditorium. The remaining team members reached for the washroom window on the ground floor. Lin stayed back to watch for any intervention by the security staff outside. The other two started cutting the window grill to disable the electronic circuits in the control and the surveillance room. They muffled the sound with a towel wrapped around the cutting point.

The grill was cut and everything was going on as planned, exact to the minute. Their watches were all synchronised and in addition to that, they were communicating over a private closed loop wireless communication system.

There were three guards inside the secure building. One was in the ‘Rest Room’ and two were in the ‘Surveillance Room’ that housed a number of digital screens. Zhang inched in, slowly but surely. He put on a gas mask and slowly slid a can of a leaking anaesthetic gas inside the surveillance room. The

guards were instantly alerted by the smoke emanating from the can but it was lethal and fast acting. They collapsed to the floor almost immediately.

Ms. Mei, wearing a gas mask attached to a small oxygen cylinder strapped to her back sat on the seat opposite the Central Control computer and began disabling the different security instruments one by one, using a code breaking algorithm she had devised during her doctoral studies. She was skilled at her job, swift and worked like a pro. She had done this on multiple occasions before, but there were certain auto-check procedures that she had to overcome or bypass, using auto generated passwords. This needed her full concentration, as she had to crack multiple codes and generate passwords using AI software, sometimes a few simultaneously. Hong Tao called up from the roof to enquire when he was to break in; exact to the minute, just in case there was a change of time. Lin told him to enter after two minutes and thirty seconds. At this point, unexpectedly, the third guard got up from his bed in an adjoining room to go to the washroom in the lobby area. He suspected fire when he saw smoke emanating from the Surveillance Room. He took a fire extinguisher hung on the wall in the corridor and went towards the room. The door was half open and he was intrigued to see his colleagues on the floor and a masked woman on the computer and another masked man beside her. He banged the extinguisher button and fired the jet of the extinguishing chemical at the masked intruders.

Things at this point went horribly wrong!

Chapter 4:

Plan Compromised



The two minutes and thirty seconds time period had elapsed. Hong Tao slowly hung and descended from the third floor, tied to a rope attached to a pulley that was operated by a small electric motor. He went down as planned but the electronic surveillance system was not completely disabled till then. He was a little more than halfway down the dome when the alarm went off. He had no option but to head back to the roof.

“What the hell happened?!” he yelled on his microphone.

Zhang replied that he had been attacked by a guard while disabling the electrical circuits. “Lin is on the computer and she will disable it. In another thirty seconds you may descend”, he yelled back. “The internal security has been compromised and you have a window period of four minutes before the security backup system restarts and takes over. Remember four minutes only. I am leaving the building by our defined exit route. You get the Buddha idol and slide down from the roof towards the garden. We’ll be waiting for you there.”

The onyx Buddha was sitting quietly, serene and deeply meditative. The glass box was cut with a laser torch and the Buddha idol was lifted and placed in a thick polythene bag filled with cotton and polythene fibre. This was then placed in the backpack. The whole operation was over in three minutes. In another minute, Hong Tao rose back to the roof, rolled up

the wires, pulley and the motor and slid down slowly using the same rope attached to the hook on the roof parapet wall.

Together they all ran through the museum garden, jumped over the boundary wall one by one, stopped an auto rickshaw and disappeared in the maze of the evening traffic.

In the meantime, the third guard came back to his senses. He found the alarm system functioning. He was dizzy and confused as the anaesthetic gas had affected him also. He somehow staggered to his Rest Room with an unstable gait, like an alcohol addict and phoned his controlling officer.

“We have been attacked by a few unknown assailants. My two colleagues are deeply unconscious due to some kind of a chemical or gas. The alarm system and the security software are working, but I feel that we may have been robbed. Please send a backup immediately.”

At the hotel in Paharganj the Chinese guests requested the reception staff for an early breakfast at 6.30 am the very next morning and went to their allotted rooms. They said that they would check out by 7.00 am in order to catch the morning flight to Varanasi.

After a light supper they all went back to their rooms and waited for the coming dawn.

Chapter 5: Journey to Sarnath



The ‘tourists’ boarded the flight to Varanasi from Terminal 3 of the IGI airport in New Delhi. As they fastened their seat belts, Zhang opened the morning paper tucked behind the front seat ahead of him and read the headline, “Buddha idol stolen from the Delhi Museum.” The news had become the ‘Breaking News’ in all TV news channels. More than two thousand kilometres away in a remote distant village on the lap of a hill in Sikkim, an old man was rudely awakened by his neighbours.

“Grandpa”, a group of people said, “Your Buddha has been stolen once again, this time from the museum in New Delhi.”

This wizened old man lived with his son in Bomtar village. His son was a former colonel in the Indian army who had fought bravely in the Kargil war with Pakistan. He also had two grandsons who lived in far away New Delhi. The elder one had joined the Indian army recently as Second Lieutenant and was undergoing training in the Army Base Camp in New Delhi. His other grandson was an undergraduate student in Delhi University, North Campus.

The Stolen Buddha was a family heirloom. It was with the family for more than a thousand years. Carved out of a single piece of onyx, it was the only one of its kind in the world. Presently valued at more than five crores in Indian rupees, it adorned the family altar in their worship room for ages. Its value was in its divinity and its antiquity rather than its uniqueness. As history goes, it was probably made in China as

was evident from the unique Chinese style of sculpture. At the base of the idol on the front were eight small diamonds, one carat each, studded on a background of 18 carat gold plating. The Chinese inscription indicated that these represented the eight fold path of Buddha. It was prized even by the villagers who gathered each year in 'Grandpa's home' on the occasion of Buddha's Mahaparinirvana celebrations.

Grandpa was shaken and could not rise from his armchair. His vision was blurred and the cacophony of the noises added to his confusion resulting from his Alzheimer's. He was trembling.

"Stop it! Shut up!" he said, his voice shaking, "Let me think."

His neighbour, Mr. Gurung said, "We had repeatedly told you not to donate it to the museum. It was safe here from pilferage for ages."

Grandpa did not respond. He tried to think hard. After a long hiatus he rose and replied, "What has happened has happened; now it is our solemn duty to bring it back to where it truly belongs."

The airline slowly descended and landed in Varanasi airport. At the Arrival area, stood Mr. Vijay Singh the travel agent who had arranged a large, spacious taxi for their onward journey to Sarnath near Varanasi and their onward journey to Bodh Gaya, in the neighbouring state of Bihar. The group first went to a hotel near the army cantonment area and freshened up. The idol was put in the safe box inside the cupboard. After an early lunch of rice and boiled vegetables they departed for Sarnath reading the travel booklets kept in their car on the way. They appeared as tourists eager to visit their God's own land. There was no mention of their official activity or tasks on the way. Neither did they discuss anything other than the importance of Buddha's First Sermon

at Sarnath. They were thorough professionals. Each task was performed as planned and to perfection. At Sarnath they happened to meet a group of Chinese tourists who were brought there by an Indian package tour operator and they mingled with the crowd.

Sarnath is an ancient Buddhist town about eight kilometres from Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh where Lord Buddha delivered his First Sermon to his first four disciples in the Deer Park after his 'awakening' to the truth of our existence beyond 'Dukkha', in this dreamlike fabric of space-time. The tourist guide said, "His holy sermon in Pali language dwelt upon 'Dukkha' and the path to end suffering through the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-fold Path, known as the Dhammacakkhappavathana Sutta."

All the tourists were prayerful and full of awe seeing the sites that Buddha walked and preached. They were incessantly clicking their cameras.

"This site gave birth to the Sammatiya School of Buddhism, one of the Nikaya or Hinayana School of Buddhism", continued the guide, "and it was here that the mighty Emperor Ashoka built numerous stupas and monuments in the third century BC. Unfortunately, you can see very few of them as Sarnath was ransacked and raised to the ground by a Muslim Turk of the Aybak tribe, who later became the Sultan of Delhi. He was the first king of the Slave Dynasty, King Qutub-ud-din Aibak who is 1194 AD, ventured into the Indian subcontinent from Turkestan in Kazakhstan.

The four 'tourists' appeared to be genuinely interested in the sites and specifically sat down at the site of the First Sermon and meditated for a brief period while the others moved on to view the adjoining massive and revered Dhamek Stupa.

Grandpa picked up his landline phone and dialled a number. In distant Delhi his younger grandson picked up his mobile phone.

“Tiger”, Grandpa said, for that was the nick name he had given his beloved second grandson. “Our Lord has been stolen and you know it. Listen to me carefully. It has to be brought back. It is our object of love, devotion and adoration. I’m giving you the responsibility to bring it back to where it rightly belongs no matter what the cost. I want our beloved Buddha back.”

Chapter 6: The Investigations Begin



Tiger was in a state of déjà vu. He had been awakened from his deep slumber by this unexpected phone call. It took a moment for the importance of this disturbing information to sink in. He sat on the edge of his bed and placed the palms of his hands on his face to calm down.

What a way to start the day.

Mr. Choudhury was reading the morning news paper on the balcony of his flat over a cup of hot tea. He knew that he would get a call from his office soon. The responsibility of cracking such cases was invariably assigned to him. It is dangerous to be sharp, honest and efficient in the police department. He was the head of the Criminal Investigation Department or CID. He had cracked the nexus between the international drug cartels and two senior politicians in the recent past. Last year he had received the President's medal of honour for his exemplary service to the nation.

As expected his mobile phone rang. The Inspector General of Police, Mr. Rajat Kumar was on the phone.

"Mr. Choudhury", he said, "you must have read the papers. Meet me at 11.00 AM in my office."

Mr. Choudhury was a workaholic. His family life had been disrupted by his killing work schedule. He typed on the Google search engine, "Buddha in the Delhi Museum", to obtain preliminary information about the stolen idol. He

always went to the official meeting well informed and well prepared. He was known for his diligence.

Tiger got up from his bed and went to the washroom. His head was in a dizzy. He was eagerly looking forward to spending a week in Mussoorie with his close friends. This is not what he had bargained for. After a quick breakfast in the college canteen, he went to the police station near the museum. He introduced himself to the Station House Officer or SHO.

“I am Yatin Tamang, grandson of Buddhamitra Tamang, who had donated the Buddha idol to the government for safekeeping in the Delhi Museum and which was stolen yesterday.”

“Look”, replied the SHO, “the investigations are in the preliminary stage. The CID and the forensic experts have reached the site. We also have to complete the necessary formalities. Here, take my mobile number. Call me tomorrow in the evening.”

“Ok sir”, said Yatin, “in the meantime will it possible for me to meet the Director of the museum today?”

“I fear not”, said the SHO, “but you may give it a try. Today I guess he’ll be busy as he is assisting the investigating team.”

Yatin nevertheless went to the parking space, started his 350 cc motorbike with a roar and headed straight for the museum. As expected, he was stopped by a posse of guards and other policemen at the gate. “No one is allowed to enter today”, barked an officer in Hindi.

“Sir”, said Yatin, “the stolen idol was once donated to the museum by my grandfather. Kindly allow me to enter and meet the director, Mr. Nabin Sharma.”

“Do you have an ID?” said the ‘hawaladar’.

“Yes, I am a student of Delhi University and here is my ID”, replied Yatin.

“Ok proceed”, said a policeman and cleared his path to allow him to enter the museum precincts. Yatin had to wait in the Visitor’s Room as the Director was on the second floor along with the forensic team for almost an hour and a half. Finally Mr. Sharma returned to his chamber. He gave a quick, disdainful glance at Yatin as he entered his office chamber. He was obviously in a very bad mood.

Chapter 7:

From Sarnath to Bodh Gaya



The tourists got down from the car at the Buddhist monument in Sarnath. Set amidst gardens, the imposing ancient structure literally ‘spoke’ of the First Sermon of the ‘Enlightened One’ after his elevation to the status of Sakya-muni or Buddha, from an unknown mendicant and anchorite and once upon a time the Crown Prince of the Sakya clan in the Himalayan foothills in Nepal Siddhartha.

The officially designated guide spoke in English as he pointed out the different ancient architectural monuments. The Chinese ‘tourists’ moved imperceptibly along with the crowd of tourists. It was a beautiful sunny day in the winter of 2016 and all the tourists were having a great time visiting the spot where Buddha had delivered his First Sermon in Sarnath and an adjoining museum built by the Government of India.

After lunch the hired car started for Bodh Gaya, famed for its ‘Bodhi tree’ under which Siddhartha had awakened to see the multiverse and beyond, afresh, as part and parcel of his own infinite self or being and the famed Mahabodhi temple, revered by millions of Buddhists, the world over.

At the Director’s office in the New Delhi Museum in Delhi, Yatin described how his grandfather had donated the stolen Buddha idol to the government and sought information of the recent developments.

“I cannot say much as we are in the initial stage of the investigations. However, there seems to be a security breach around 11.00 PM. No arrests have been made so far. The

work seems to have been done by thoroughbred professionals skilled in the art of stealing antiques. I personally suspect an international gang of antique thieves were involved. The police officials are working on that angle also.”

“An international gang?” enquired Yatin.

“Yes”, continued the Director. “Similar incidents have occurred in other parts of India and abroad, in South East Asia not long ago.

“They are highly skilled and have local accomplices to assist them. Like terrorists, they possibly have sleeper cells where they can disappear if the environment becomes too hot for them. I greatly suspect that these gangs also fund terrorist activities and also get logistics and other support from them. They could also be linked to the international drug cartels.”

Yatin got up from his chair. “Thank you sir”, “I shall keep in touch with you. For my family it was not a treasured historical item. It was an object of veneration and worship. In that sense it was priceless for us. If there’s any way I could be of help, do let me know.”

“I can understand your feelings son”, replied the Director. “I shall also seek your help on this issue if needed. Leave behind your name, address and mobile number and your email address with my secretary.”

Yatin left the secretary’s room leaving behind a small piece of paper on which he had written down the details asked for. A sense of helplessness was creeping up his spine.

Near the border between Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the hired car was inching closer to Bodh Gaya. They crossed the famous Barabar hills with its rock cut Buddhist caves and in another half an hour they could see the Mahabodhi temple from a distance. From now on, as planned, they would have to move more discreetly, camouflaging from time to time,

disappearing on occasions, changing their identity, till they reached their final destination, the Indo-China border in Sikkim.

In Bodh Gaya, Dr. Chan, the Delhi based dentist had made arrangements for their stay in the official residence of the Medical Officer in Charge or MOIC of the Primary Health Centre located close to the Mahabodhi temple. The MOIC never stayed in the hospital campus and commuted from the neighbouring district town of Gaya where he had built a palatial house with a private clinic on its ground floor. He surreptitiously used his official quarter as a guest house for foreign backpackers who came as tourists and who were on the lookout for a cheap accommodation. This provided some extra income. This was an ideal place for the Chinese tourists to disappear as the medical officer did not keep any written or digital record of anyone staying at his residence. His monetary transactions were in cash.

But in the temple precincts the security was very tight and there were multiple check points where surveillance with video CCTV cameras at strategic locations were fitted. They needed to dress up appropriately to avoid detection should these video footages be examined at a later point of time by the police.

Chapter 8:

The Surfacing of Clues



Mr. Choudhury had been handpicked for cracking this case. The theft had become a 'Breaking News' in all TV news channels and was a great embarrassment for the government. They had to solve the case and solve it fast and recover the idol.

A certain street side CCTV camera perched on an electric pole revealed a few people jumping over the boundary wall. Due to the poor lighting, the visibility was not enough to extract enough information for further analysis. The thermal cameras of the museum detected a few people behind the bushes, but these images had disappeared after a while.

"They were trained professionals and they were using thermal suits", said Mr. Choudhury to the forensic team. "They entered through the toilet window. We have picked up a few fingerprints. These may or may not be theirs."

A personnel from the Archaeological Survey of India came in and sought permission to talk to Mr. Choudhury separately. "The idol stolen", he said, "is now worth more than probably quarter of a million US dollars in the international market. This must be the work of an international gang of smugglers who have worldwide contacts to dispose the stolen idol within a short span of time. Small stolen idols such as these change hands quickly."

Mr. Choudhury told the forensic team, "I believe they must have scouted this area before finalising their plans. I want the

video footage of the visitors from seventy two hours prior to the theft.”

He continued, “Every frame needs to be checked in detail. Look for a small group of individuals, possibly foreigners among the visitors. I also want to talk to the guides who usher in the visitors and show them around.... and where is the third guard? Where is he?”

The forensic experts resumed their photography session prior to extracting the finger prints. On completion they went to the Surveillance Room to obtain the video footage and voice samples in the recordings if any. Mr. Choudhury’s mobile rang. It was the Inspector General of Police calling him.

“You see Choudhury a senior official of RAW had called me over the phone about five minutes ago. He said that he had specific information of a Chinese terrorist group and arms supplier in touch with a dentist based in New Delhi by the name of Dr. Chan. He received a similar feedback from an official in the Chinese Embassy of an international gang of thieves entering India from Shanghai. RAW has been tracking this dentist and found him visiting a few Chinese tourists in a hotel in Paharganj. These Chinese tourists also visited an antique shop near the museum. You need to check out this angle also. Why don’t you go to the RAW headquarters and meet Mr. Khatri who has the necessary details.”

“Yes sir”, said Mr. Choudhury, I will go there today at around 4:00 pm.”

A member of the forensic unit came and said, “Sir, the guards are out of the ICU of the Trauma Centre of All India Institute of Medical Science. You can talk to them in the special cabin. You have the Duty Doctor’s permission.”

“Ok”, replied Mr. Choudhury. “I will leave right away.” He had years of experience in tracking down criminals. He had developed a sixth sense. Like a trained police dog he could literally smell the rat in a hole. On the way he had that uncanny feeling that he was on the right track. It was these Chinese ‘tourists’ who had stolen the idol.

In the Trauma Centre he met the doctor on duty and asked him about the guard’s condition. The doctor told him that it was very likely that an anaesthetic gas poisoning had taken place based on their clinical signs and symptoms. Necessary samples had been sent to the lab for confirmation and further workup. Presently symptomatic and support treatment had been given. It would be better to talk to them in a single session only. Mr. Choudhury assured him that he would keep his session brief but should any new facts surface later, he might have to interrogate them once again.

“We are deploying two guards for their safety. The communiqué has been sent to your medical superintendent in this regard. They will remain on guard outside the room,” he said.

For security reasons there were only three beds in that chamber. The occupants were awake but slightly disoriented. Mr. Choudhury said, “I am the Head of the Criminal Investigation Department, Mr. Choudhury. I have come to discuss the events leading to the theft of the idol.”

The three security guards tried to sit up on their beds but Mr. Choudhury asked them to be comfortable. “I want each one of you, one by one, to recall the events in detail just prior to the theft one by one.”

The first to speak up was the senior most among the three.

“Sir”, he said, “everything was quiet and as usual until suddenly we heard a sound and then detected smoke in one

room. I first thought that there was fire in the computer CPUs kept at the back. So I turned around to check it out. It was then that I realised that there was a can on the floor from which smoke was coming out. I started to feel dizzy and then I lost my consciousness.”The second guard said more or less the same thing. The sound of a falling can had alerted him. He too turned around to see what had fallen. “I remember very little beyond that”.

“Did both of you see anyone either on your surveillance monitors or near you?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“No”, they said unanimously.

“And what about you?” asked Mr. Choudhury to the third guard.

“Sir I was in the ante room, relaxing. I was supposed to take over once my duty hour started. At around 10:15 PM, I needed to go to the adjoining toilet. As I left my room I noticed smoke in the surveillance room. I suspected that fire had probably broken out, so I took a fire extinguisher from the wall in the corridor and entered the room.

“Then?” asked Mr. Choudhury

“On entering the room I saw my two colleagues on the floor and a masked person sitting on the computer table. On a sudden reflex I banged the button of the extinguisher on the floor and shot the chemical froth directly towards the face of the intruder.

“Did you get an opportunity to see his face?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“No sir, the mask covered the entire face of the intruder except the eyes.”

“Give me a description of him. His size, built, skin colour. Whether ‘he’ was lean or muscular?”

“The intruder was of short height, around five feet three inches tall, of medium build, and athletic. ‘He’ was wearing some kind of a suit with a zip from his lower abdomen right up to his neck.”

“That was a suit to avoid heat radiation and heat convection. It is generally used to avoid being detected by thermal cameras”, said Mr. Choudhury. “What happened after that?”

“The intruder wiped off the froth from the glass pane of his gas mask and attacked me. The person was either a male or a female. ‘He’ pushed me and as I fell down, I hit the back of my head on a desk. I am afraid I don’t remember anything after that.”

Mr. Choudhury switched off the recorder button on his mobile and got up.

“Take care”, he said. “I’ll get in touch with you once I get any additional information that needs clarification or needs to be substantiated from your end.” He was gone the next minute and the door closed quietly behind him.

Chapter 9: Off the Radar



Security in the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya had been beefed up following a terrorist attack a few years ago by an international Islamic terrorist group in protest against the so called atrocities meted out by the Buddhists on the Rohingya Muslims in Burma or Myanmar. There were surveillance cameras all around at different strategic points and identification checks were being done at certain entry points.

The team decided to avoid visiting the Mahabodhi temple and rather tour a few of the neighbouring temples made by the governments of neighbouring Buddhist countries before leaving for Sikkim via Katihar in North Bihar. They decided not to travel by train as they would be ‘visible’ to all police officials on the way, particularly at the railway stations which had surveillance cameras installed in each platform. There was another serious and troublesome issue. Should the police force detect them somehow at any point and decide to nab them enroute, it would not be possible for them to escape from a running train or a railway platform. It would be safer to travel by car provided they did not stop at any hotel or any crowded place till they reached Katihar in north Bihar. From there they would board the Kamakhya express train from the railway station next to Katihar, which goes right up to the state of Assam in the north east region of India. Since a large number of people travelling to Assam and north eastern states have mongoloid facial features, they could mingle with the passengers and reach New Jalpaiguri railway station in north Bengal via Katihar unnoticed.

Mr.Choudhury reached the RAW office in New Delhi at 4.30 pm. Ms. Ritu Kumar, Superintendent of Police was waiting in the lobby to escort him to the Chief's chamber located on the fourth floor. They took the usual lift meant for staff after submitting themselves to the iris-scanner verification. A tall, burly, muscular man also accompanied them. He had an ear piece with an antenna attached to it. He stood at the back of the lift with his hands crossed. On reaching the fourth floor he walked ahead and reached out to open the door of room number 402 for Mr. Choudhury and Ms. Kumar, but did not enter the room. Once the duo entered, he stood outside crossing his arms once again.

Mr. R. Khatri was Head of the Research & Analysis Wing, better known as RAW. He was approaching his superannuation year but didn't appear to look that old. He rose from his chair to greet Mr. Choudhury and Ms. Kumar.

"Your reputation precedes you Mr. Choudhury", he said.

"Thank you sir", replied Mr. Choudhury. They settled down on a luxurious sofa near the window.

"You see, we have been tracking three international gangs involved in smuggling of arms and ammunitions. Two of them operated in our north eastern states, and had their headquarters in Beijing, China. These gangs also dealt with smuggling of intravenous drugs in the "Golden Triangle" and occasionally in the pilferage and sale of expensive antiques."

"You mean one of these gangs stole the idol?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"We have a high degree of suspicion that one of them is involved. One of the gang members who visited the antique shop on the evening of the theft is a prime suspect. We are closing in on the dentist Dr. Chan and the hotel in Paharganj near the railway station. Half an hour ago we received a

classified message routed through the Chinese embassy that four trained members of a gang have probably reached Delhi a few days back. I would request you to personally accompany my team to the dental clinic and the hotel. You have an eye for detail and your experience will help us track them down. Meanwhile we'll examine the IGI airport CCTV footages."

"When do we start?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"Today evening", replied Mr. Khatri. "We have no time to lose. We have hired a vehicle and all my men will be travelling in plain clothes. You too wear a jeans trouser and a T-shirt, preferably white."

"Why a white T-shirt?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"A white T-shirt matches a blue denim trouser. That's all", laughed Mr. Khatri. "My team will pick you up from the Civil Services Officers' Institute dining hall near Connaught Place at 8.30 PM sharp. They'll recognise you by your dress along with other inputs."

"Ok", said Mr. Choudhury as he got up from his chair to take his leave.

"Mr. Choudhury", said Mr. Khatri, "there is another thing that I believe you must think about. In fact I am working on that angle also. The cyber attack that affected some of our government offices that very evening was a ransom-ware attack. It has crippled some of our Home Department computers. Our Cyber Security Centre is working on this. Just see if the two incidents are linked to each other in any way."

Mr. Choudhury's face appeared thoughtful. "I don't think so", he said. "They broke into the museum and crippled the safety features in the surveillance room before collecting their booty. They are separate from the other group of hackers."

They would not play two games at one go. They are physically here and these rats have to escape out of India unnoticed. That's a tough call now that we've been alerted."

The burly muscleman escorted Mr. Choudhury to the lobby from where he left in a jiffy in the waiting vehicle. Mr. Choudhury liked cases that had a few initial leads. Years of experience had taught him to put together seemingly unrelated pieces in the jigsaw puzzle to create a comprehensive narrative. In this particular case there were few leads except the sightings of the Chinese tourists in the evening of the theft and a certain Dr. Chan, the dentist visiting a certain hotel in Paharganj and a Chinese gang being tracked by RAW. Mr. Choudhury liked his role as a sniffer dog. It gave him a "high" to work in cases like these.

He went home to change his clothes to a blue denim trouser and a white T- shirt before heading for the Civil Services Officers Institute near Connaught Place.

Chapter 10: Zeroing in



Balbinder Singh Zandu was in a bad mood. Two of his key employees had taken unauthorised “French leave” as they call it, to see a movie without his consent. He had planned to take the afternoon off to see an ailing relative, but his plans had to be shelved. He sat on his desk and cursed the absconding duo.

“You are the manager of this hotel?” asked a man in a blue denim and white T shirt.

“Yes”, replied Balbinder. “Do you need a room sir?”

“No, we want to have a word with you. We are from the Special Branch.”

For a moment Balbinder froze. He had an encounter with the police six years ago. But then, what on earth happened that these sleuths should step into his precincts once again.

“Please come to the dining hall sir. It is vacant now and we can talk in peace and quiet.”

They settled down on the chairs. It was Mr. Choudhury who started the conversation.

“Do you know Dr. Chan?” he asked.

“Yes I do”, replied Balbinder.

“Since when and how?” Mr. Choudhury looked at him with his piercing eyes. “Well”, said Balbinder, “You see, I know him since the school days. Let’s say since the last thirty years.”

“Tell us all you know about him.”

Balbinder knew something was terribly wrong. Did it have anything to do with the Chinese tourists he had brought to his hotel? He corrected his posture and leaned forward thinking hard whether he should reveal all he knew. After all, Dr. Chan was his childhood buddy. He couldn't let him down.

“Chan graduated as a dentist. His father was an unqualified dentist who ran his clinic near Khan Market. He later completed his post graduate studies in Chandigarh. It was now Chan's turn to replace his ageing father at their clinic.” He paused. “I visited him on a few occasions for dental consultation of my mother.”

“Anything else?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“Not much. Actually, once we got on with our professional lives, we began to drift further apart.”

“Recently he brought a few of his Chinese friends who were here as tourists. I provided them three rooms at a concessional rate. They stayed here for two days and then left for a pilgrimage to some location in Uttar Pradesh.”

“Uttar Pradesh? Where exactly in U.P. did they go?”

“I am not really sure, but I guess they went to the Buddhist pilgrimage sites possibly to Sarnath.”

“Did they reveal their travel plans to you?”

“No. I overheard Dr. Chan speaking to the driver. He probably mentioned Sarnath, if I'm not mistaken.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about them or their activity?”

“No. They appeared to be backpackers looking for a cheap accommodation. I have seen these kinds of tourists before. Some of them bargain about the room rent. In their case, my

friend Dr.Chan was negotiating and therefore I kept quiet and didn't argue."

"When did they leave?"

"Yesterday in the morning," replied Balbinder.

"Did they go out in the evening prior to their day of departure?"

"Yes they did. But they left the hotel on foot. I didn't notice any vehicle pick them up."

Mr. Choudhury looked hard at him. "What was unusual about that?"

"Nothing unusual for backpackers."

"You mean they were carrying bags on their backs?"

"Yes."

"Big bags?" asked Mr Choudhury.

"Not very big", replied Balbinder.

Balbinder leaned back in his chair. He was wondering why he was so honest and candid with these policemen. Was it that primal fear that all people have at the time of police interrogation? Or was it a desire to save himself and extricate himself from this sticky situation?"

Mr. Choudhury got up from his chair. "We'll get in touch with you again", he said. "Do not talk to your friend Dr. Chan or anyone else. I would request you not to leave Delhi for the next few days. This is a matter of national importance and your help will be invaluable. I cannot open all the cards right now. Remember to keep your mouth shut."

"Ok sir," said Balbinder.

"I want photocopies of all ID documents that have been submitted by the tourists right now. Also, we require the

CCTV camera footage covering your lobby during their period of stay. Give them to the Senior S.P.'s assistant right away."

Mr. Choudhury left the premises. He was in a hurry. It had been a long time since he had a 'fag'. Though he was right handed he loved to smoke using his left hand. It was his style statement. Before leaving, he stationed a constable to watch over Balbinder with specific instruction to ensure that he did not call anyone over the phone till he reached the dentist's clinic.

Chapter 11: The Apparition in the Mist



Mr. Choudhury was wondering whether the word ‘Sarnath’ had been deliberately dropped by Dr. Chan to mislead the police. It very well could be. But they had to scan all the options. One team would definitely go to Sarnath. The other teams would check the other exit points of the city. He was sure that they would avoid the IGI Airport in New Delhi. Leaving for Kolkata was an option. They could transfer the idol through a shipping yard and fly home empty handed. Kolkata also had a ‘China Town’ where they could safely hide or lie down low in a few sleeper cells, if there were any.

They would certainly avoid points where CCTV cameras were installed, such as railway stations and airports and would in all probability travel incognito as backpacker tourists by road. This travel to Sarnath therefore was a disturbing possibility. He needed to find Dr. Chan and find him fast. He had warned Mr. Balbinder Zandu not to talk to his friend Dr. Chan. He had also sent a team to Dr. Chan’s clinic to check out whether he was attempting to escape or disappear.

“Bloody hell!” said Mr. Choudhury, “the traffic jam makes it impossible for anyone to reach any destination on time. The Odd-Even rule for vehicles initiated earlier in New Delhi was a good option. Atleast we had less traffic even if the air pollution level didn’t drop significantly.”

A tough burly six and a half feet man in a checked cotton shirt, who sat beside Mr. Choudhury said, “I think sir, you

need to talk to the sleuths posted outside Dr. Chan's clinic. Kindly tell them that you are on your way."

Mr. Choudhury used to tease this man by calling him P.G. for 'Polly Gatto', that very mafia team member who "hated quicky jobs" in the iconic novel *Godfather* written by Mario Puzo and so he was. He was tough, very laborious and sincere to the bone. He was often found alongside Mr. Choudhury in all his critical errands. He too had a penchant for complicated tasks that exerted his mental and physical abilities. Everyone knew that he was Mr. Choudhury's right-hand man.

The car moved laboriously through the traffic. He called up Thapa who had been given charge of Dr. Chan's tracking and surveillance. "Thapa", he barked, "hope that the dentist is in his clinic."

"Yes sir", Thapa replied, "he hasn't left the clinic. The clinic is open for another half an hour. Please come quickly, or I'll have to move in."

"Don't be too sure", said Mr. Choudhury. "Send one of your men inside the clinic as a patient to inquire about Chan's presence."

Thapa at first thought of sending a constable in plain clothes, Mr. Ram Singh, but on second thoughts he decided to go in himself. On entering the clinic, he enquired if he could get an appointment. The receptionist asked him to sit and wait for his turn. There were two patients waiting in the lobby but somehow Thapa felt that something was amiss. He said that he was in a hurry and needed to see the dentist immediately. A look of fear temporarily breezed through the receptionist's face. Thapa entered the dentist's chamber without her permission. What he was about to discover was beyond his wildest expectation.

Dr. Chan was not in his chamber!

Thapa had seen Dr. Chan enter his clinic and was sure that he had not seen him leave. “Where is Dr. Chan?” he asked the receptionist.

“Dr. Chan is not available today”, said the petite Chinese girl at the reception desk. “He has gone to Bangalore to attend a conference. His assistant dentist takes charge during his absence.”

“But how can that be”, said Thapa, “I saw him enter the clinic at 10.00 am.”

“Sorry sir”, replied the receptionist. “You may have seen the assistant dentist and mistook him for Dr. Chan.”

Thapa was a man with an eagle eye. He knew he had been tricked and was in no mood for conversation. How could he make a mistake of this proportion? Years of training had prepared him for ‘out of the blue’ occasions like this.

“I am from the Special Branch. Tell me where Dr. Chan is or I will have to take you into custody.”

The receptionist stood up fearful and literally shivering to the bone. Thapa fished out his wireless handset and said, “We have a problem here sir. Dr. Chan has gone missing. Kindly come quickly. I am issuing instructions to the traffic police to cordon off the area.”

Chapter 12: Escape into Oblivion



The tourists had left the doctor's official quarter that had doubled up as a guest house in Bodh Gaya the very next morning. They had paid in Indian currency and left the hired vehicle on the day of their arrival. They couldn't risk being tracked any further. The taxi had been verbally hired in the name of a certain Mr. Rakesh Ranjan Sinha who was staying in one of the neighbouring rooms in that very hotel in Paharganj. Incidentally, Mr. Sinha was a resident of Gaya and this whole hiring business was carefully planned to avoid suspicion. Their plan was to head straight to Kolkata by a personal vehicle which belonged to Mr. Yin, a successful businessman in 'China Town' in Kolkata. Yin had come down to Bodh Gaya and had not checked into a hotel as a tourist. Rather, he had stayed at a friend's residence who was a property dealer, Mr. Randhir Singh. This property dealer had attended the South Point School in Kolkata where Yin was his classmate, years ago.

Yin was careful and entered Mr. Singh's residence after 10.00 pm to avoid being seen by his neighbours and left early the next morning, telling his childhood buddy that he needed to reach Allahabad during office hours. Yin was careful not to visit any fuel station on the way, should the CCTV cameras pick up his or his vehicle's image at any point. He carried two large containers filled with petrol in his boot and filled up his tank on the highway wherever it was isolated and barren.

Yin was an honest businessman who conducted himself conscientiously. His chance meeting with a Chinese tourist in

Park Street, Kolkata had changed the course of his life forever. This tourist had befriended him, as he hailed from the same village that Yin's ancestors had left about two hundred years ago. In reality, this tourist was an international drug dealer whose operational base was somewhere in the Golden Triangle and at that time was finalising a deal with his agents in Manipur and Myanmar and in Manila in Philippines for a drug by the name, Methamphetamine.

Yin gradually became his trusted lieutenant and soon rose in the hierarchy. His old business in manufacturing handmade shoes was just a cover-up. He handsomely paid the police on a regular basis and the poor, marginalised and the needy around him and soon became a supportive 'Don' of sorts. A certain Mr. Ho had contacted him from Shanghai over an internet call sometime back and given him the specifics of a new task. He was specifically told not to send anyone on this errand, no matter how he or she was trusted by him. He would have to go and do it himself and he would have to do it all alone.

Yin had heard the instructions with a lugubrious silence. He was getting on in his years. Driving all the way from Kolkata in the state of West Bengal to Bodh Gaya in the neighbouring state of Bihar would be tiring and painful, but he had no choice. Besides, the remuneration was handsome and far more than he had hoped for. After an early breakfast he left Gaya and headed straight to a point near an old Hindu temple. This was a relatively isolated spot. The backpackers were there, waiting for him. They all boarded his vehicle after dumping their backpacks into the boot.

"Why have you kept cans of petrol in the boot?" asked Hong Tao after hopping in.

"It is to save you guys from being detected. We'll be skipping the fuel stations," replied Yin.

The questioner looked at Yin questioningly. “I thought that there are no gas stations around here,” he said smilingly. “I hope your cans are spill proof.”

The car turned left to enter the By-pass Road connected to the inner highway. Their glass panels were pulled up, the car air-conditioner was switched on. They soon arrived at a point where the Grand Trunk Road that connected New Delhi to Kolkata and from there, crossing the international border, right up to Chittagong in Bangladesh. This road was built by the Afghan King Sher Shah Suri between 1540 and 1545 AD. The engineering skill during that medieval period must have been of a very high order and the task of building this road must have been very daunting. It has the reputation of being Asia’s oldest and longest major road that had served its people for more than two millennia.

Yin was obviously proud of the land of his birth and its heritage and took pride in describing the era during the reign of King Sher Shah Suri as he drove at a leisurely pace. The rubber ran over the asphalt as the miles disappeared under the car. The azure sky above was slowly being covered with dark clouds. Yin knew he must reach a safe spot before the rains caught up with him. He couldn’t risk stepping at any wayside motel or ‘Dhaba’ even for a hot cup of tea.

He hated this kind of job and occasionally yearned for the simple life that he left behind him. He switched on the wipers as a drizzle hit the windscreen and blurred his vision. He looked at the distant haze ahead and he knew that the task before him was tougher than he had imagined. However, he had a personal agenda. He wanted his poor nephew Cheryl to enter China with false documents and return to Kolkata with the fresh consignment of Morphine for supplying his agents in Myanmar and Nagaland. He wasn’t a hundred percent sure whether he should piggy-back this with the escape of the

'tourists' or do it along with a separate assignment. But Lin was new to this kind of job, poor, needed money and in the years to come could become his trusted lieutenant. He had to be trained well in real life situations and trained fast. This could well be his initiation, his internship. Possibly, this was the defining moment.

"Mind if I ask you for a favour?" asked Yin.

"What"? , replied Lin.

"You see, I have this nephew, Cheryl who is poor and without a job. I want to initiate him into this trade that we all do. Would you agree to take him along with you to China? He has already been given forged Chinese documents and a passport and can return home without your assistance."

"You see", replied Hong Tao who was the one sitting in the middle of the back seat, "We work according to a plan. We don't deviate. We don't compromise. We don't add on jobs. The outcome is the most important thing, but so is the journey. We won't risk our lives and our mission."

"Can I talk to your boss? What if he gives his permission?" asked Yin.

"Once we are on a mission, the H.Q. has no official control over us, nor do we keep in touch with anyone, said Zhang. "We go according to the plan, but if needed, we make necessary alterations in our plan based on consensus and scientific analysis of the ongoing events. We have a policy of zero tolerance towards any risk taking behaviour!"

Yin looked a trifle worried. His plans to expand his base and induct his nephew Cheryl into his business would not be as easy as he had surmised. These professionals were here on a mission and they were not interested in anything other than

their plan and the mission objectives. He drove ahead at an average speed to avoid any problem enroute. His worry was evident on his forehead and the wrinkles were being closely observed in the rear-view mirror by the 'tourist' sitting in the middle of the back seat.

Chapter 13:

The Inheritor Begins his Search



As Tiger rode his motorbike back to Delhi University, North Campus, he was clueless as to what he needs to do in the days ahead. Obviously, the Special Branch police officers must have started their investigations with the inputs received from the Forensic Department, but then, what if the so-called Chinese tourists escaped with the booty before they are tracked down in New Delhi.

He reached his hostel and dropped dead on his bed. His grandfather's words were still ringing in his ears. After an hour he got up, as his plans began to crystallise in his brain. He knew he must do this job and do it alone, but he had no leads at present. He had to be part of the police investigation team in its initial stages and then branch off and hunt down the thieves like a Black Panther hunts down its prey in the thick foliage.

A seemingly insignificant incident that had occurred on the sidewalk near the museum in the evening of the event suddenly struck him like a thunderbolt. He had gone all alone to Janpath road looking for some antique item to purchase a birthday gift for his friend. Not finding any item to his liking he had driven up to a row of shops near the museum. There, as he was about to enter one of the shops a person brushed past him in such a way that his side bag which slung on his shoulder had fallen on the street. Tiger was apologetic. "Sorry sir", he had said as he had picked up the bag and handed it to him. The man had taken his side bag and slung it on his shoulder without a word and moved on. Tiger had

noticed that he was of Chinese descent, of medium built and an athletic look. He left without a word in the opposite direction. Just as Tiger was to proceed further, he had noticed that something was lying on the sidewalk. He had picked it up. It was an ID card. An ID card in Mandarin script. Though the contents were unreadable, the picture was bright and clear. It certainly belonged to the person who had brushed past him. He turned around to call him in order to return his card, but he was nowhere to be seen in the darkness ahead. Evening had descended and the street light was not functional. But even then, it was impossible for anyone to disappear so quickly.

The strangeness of the disappearance had struck him as queer and unusual. At first he had thought of depositing the ID card at the nearest police station, but then he decided to do it the next day, as he had to rush back to his hostel for dinner. The card was still in his breast pocket. He took it out and gave it a hard look. He decided to get a few photocopies of the ID card printed in a shop nearby before depositing it at the police station near Janpath road.

Police? Why should it be returned to the police station? He decided to use this ID card as bait to enter the precincts of the investigating teams and probably the team itself. He would do all it takes to track down the pilferers and if he was on the right trail, he would branch off at an opportune moment and go for the kill –all alone. He knew he could do it as he was lethally armed with his newly acquired martial arts skills taught by his brother.

Tiger sat in his hostel canteen working out his strategy when he was woken up from his reverie by a call on his mobile phone. It was from Khyante, an elder brother of a friend who incidentally happened to work in the museum.

“Yes”, he said, wondering why he had rung up in the first place.

“Tiger”, said Khyante from the other end, “I need to talk to you in private. Not over the mobile. Can you come over at lunch time, say around 1.00 pm at the restaurant opposite the building that housed the NACO Headquarters on Janpath road”.

“Is it pertaining to the recent theft of our idol?” enquired Tiger.

“Yes”, he replied, “But there’s more to it than meets the eye. Do come”.

“Ok. I’ll be there.” said Tiger and hung up.

That morning, he has a few important lecture classes to attend, but he had no option. He had to move swiftly or else he would silently and helplessly watch his family heirloom disappear into thin air. Probably, forever.

Mr. Khyante was waiting for him at the restaurant when Tiger’s 350 cc motorcycle zoomed in. Tiger walked up to the secluded corner table where Khyante was sitting and shook his hand. “Long time no see,” he said. He knew him since childhood and he was distantly related to him as well from his mother’s side. Though he was about five years older than him, he was like a friend. During childhood, they would climb trees together in their maternal grandfather’s large family backyard orchard and play allkinds of tricks on one another.

They ordered Cappuccino. Khyante looked round to see if anyone was within their hearing distance. “You see”, he began, “Your grandfather had phoned me yesterday. He told me that this was not just any idol of historical importance. It was an idol worthy of veneration and a family heirloom for well over a thousand years. It was worshiped down the generations by his forefathers till very recently. He had given

it to the museum at government's request for its safekeeping. Now the time has come for it to return to where it belongs."

Tiger stared hard at him. His face was quiet, observant and emotionless. Tiger was always like that. Cool and confident, he rarely displaying his emotions publicly. His grandfather knew him well and knew that given a responsibility, he could carry out a mission with clockwork precision and digital accuracy.

"I know", he replied.

Khyante continued, "Your grandfather believes only you can bring it back even if the thieves take it to hell! What do you say?"

Tiger looked out of the glass window for a few seconds and then spoke slowly, "I love my grandpa and worship him like a God. His word is a command! I shall do all that is necessary and all that is in my power to get it back. But the problem is, I don't know where to begin and therefore I need to be part and parcel of the police investigation team till the scent of those animals is detected. And then, I will branch off and go for the kill."

"What I am really worried about is that we have already lost a lot of time and I hope they haven't crossed the Indian border yet. If they do, it will become increasingly difficult or possibly impossible to retrieve our idol."

Khyante said, "I'm in constant touch with Mr. Choudhury. I'll talk to him about your induction in the investigating team. You can take off for start from there."

Tiger nodded in agreement. "Can you arrange for a sickness certificate from a doctor known to you? I'll attach it to my leave application in my college and work in this full time away from the college campus."

“That shouldn’t be a problem. You start packing your bags”, replied Khyante.

It was October the 8th, 2016, Saturday and Durga Puja festival was being celebrated in the New Delhi Kali Bari temple. The sound of cymbals, conch shells and drums reached the ears of Tiger as his motorbike whizzed past the temple. Mentally saluting the divine Mother Kali, he prayed that she grant her blessings in this endeavour, even though he was a Buddhist.

That very evening he received a call from Mr. Choudhury. “Yatin Tamang”, he said, for that was the formal name he knew ‘Tiger’. He continued, “Come and meet me tomorrow in my office. We need to discuss what kind of role you may play in the present ongoing investigation.”

“At what time do I get to meet you sir?”

“I have a meeting at 11:30 am in the North Block office. I should be free by lunch time. How about meeting me in the restaurant of the CSOI near Connaught Place at 2:00 pm?”

“Ok sir”, said Tiger and hung up. “The ball has been set rolling”, he said to himself. Divine Mother Goddess Kali was kind enough to help him.

His grandfather had told him that in the Buddhist scriptures there’s mention of Goddess Prajnaparamita who was the personification of ultimate wisdom. Sitting on his grandpa’s lap Tiger had heard stories of Goddess Hariti who had been transformed from a child eating ogress to a protector of children. What intrigued him was that there was mention of Tara, the consort of Avalokiteswara, who was a Bodhisattva and interestingly, Tara is also a name by which the Hindu Goddess Kali is mentioned in Tara pith in West Bengal and She is known by the same name in Nepal and Tibet as the goddess of wisdom. Here, the people speak of Her as the

consort of Brihaspati, the God of the mighty planet Jupiter and She had a son called Budha, the God of planet Mercury.

After his classes in the first half, he rode to the CSOI near Connaught Place and reached there by 1:45 pm and sat in its spacious lobby. It was dark and cool and appeared to be furnished years earlier. Outside he had seen a stone plaque stating that the Indian Constitution had been partly drafted there by Bhimrao Ambedkar and Rajendra Prasad among others. He sat down comfortably soaking in the ambience and waiting for the police officer who would give him the chance of a lifetime.

Mr. Choudhury reached the venue at 2:10 pm. “Sorry for the delay”, he said, “The meeting was an extended one and like all meetings, was fruitless and time consuming. I sometimes wonder why there are so many meetings in the government offices. We hardly have any time left for work.”

Tiger smiled back. He never had any desire to enter the Civil Services. He was planning to join the army like his elder brother who was presently posted in the Army Cantonment area on the way to Dwarka in New Delhi. He loved his elder brother dearly but got little opportunity to meet him though he was posted in the same city. The traffic and congestion was a deterrent. Today however, he decided, he must meet him to discuss this issue. Any effort, he reasoned, must be a team effort and not an arena of individual heroics. How come his grandfather had said that only he could get the idol back? Only he could retrieve it?

Immersed in his thoughts he hardly noticed Mr. Choudhury reaching out to him to take him to the adjoining restaurant hall.

“Come, come”, he said, “lunch is getting delayed. You young man may not be hungry with a tummy full of junk food, but I am. Come.”

They silently walked down to a table in the corner. This was Mr. Choudhury's favourite spot. The bearer there had served him for well over 12 years. Both knew each other. The bearer needed no directions from the menu chart. He knew it was Saturday and Mr. Choudhury would have his glass of lager beer followed by a course of Chinese dishes.

Mr. Choudhury called out to him. "I have a friend with me today", he said, "Please ask him what he wants." Before the waiter could ask Tiger his preferences, he replied in a jiffy, "I'll have whatever sir is desirous of eating. Make that two. Thank you."

The first few minutes were quiet and Mr. Choudhury maintained a lugubrious silence. He wasn't a man given to moods, but he had received information that his mother was ill in Kolkata early that morning and was contemplating rushing there to see her in the ICU of the Woodland Hospital. He spoke gravely after a pregnant pause.

"You see Yatin, we've received a request from Mr. Khyante of the museum and we did a background check on you. You are the inheritor of the stolen idol. You have had a chance interaction with one of the suspected Chinese tourists and besides that you are trained in martial arts. I think you can join the team proceeding to Kolkata to nab the culprits."

Tiger was wondering as to how he knew that he had a chance encounter with a Chinese person the previous evening. He hadn't discussed it with anyone. He hid his surprise.

"Kolkata?" asked Tiger. "Are the thieves there?"

"Our Intel tells us that they are heading for Sarnath and from there possibly to Bodh Gaya. This was to befool us to believe that they are tourists visiting the Buddhist shrines. Our forensic experts did a body match of some of the images in the museum with those in the arrival zone of the IGI Airport.

They are probably a group of four people disguised as backpacker tourists. From the body match we have obtained a few photographs which had to be partially computer generated. I was informed by Mr Khyante that you possibly could help identify them.”

“You see”, replied Tiger, “I am not sure; it’s just a hunch that I may have bumped into one of them.”

Mr. Choudhury’s eyes pierced into his. From his eyes one could tell that he was fully alert and observing all the non verbal signs and fishing out the clues. Tiger continued, “On the evening of the theft, I happened to go to Janpath to buy an antique for a friend on his birthday. Not getting what I wanted, I went over to the row of shops selling antiques just outside the museum. There I accidentally bumped into a Chinese person, possibly a tourist whose bag fell off his shoulder. When I picked it up and gave it to him, I saw his face. I clearly remember his facial features.”

“Then you can help identify one of them”, said Mr. Choudhury, “Just in case you bumped into one of the suspects. Just in case, that is.”

“There is more to that”, replied Tiger. “When the tourist slung the bag back on his shoulder and went off into the darkness, as the street light was not working, I suddenly noticed that he had dropped something. It turned out to be a Chinese ID card. That ID card had his photograph on it.”

“Do you have it with you now?”

“Yes sir, here it is”, said Tiger pulling it out of his breast pocket.

“Good. After lunch, let us go to the forensic lab. We have no time to lose. “Both however ate their lunch leisurely and at 3:00 pm drove off in an air-conditioned taxi to their designated spot- the forensic lab.

Chapter 14:

Forensics at Work



Not very surprisingly, not a single 'alien' fingerprint could be picked up from different vantage points of the museum. These sites were carefully selected on the basis of the CCTV camera footages and thermal scans even though they were patchy and occasionally unclear. One or two clear images were available, but they were only fleeting images. The best lead was from a desktop camera that was as per protocol on a switched on mode when the assailant had attacked the guards. A body matching with the images of the Chinese tourists exiting the IGI Airport, Terminal - 3 was the best bet as the ID cards submitted in the Paharganj hotel were fictitious. Dr. Chan is also off the radar and hiding somewhere in the alleys. Hence there was no one to corroborate any fact or information. Tracking of the taximovement through data available from the toll-tax booths on the national highway confirmed that the taxi had reached Sarnath via Bodh Gaya. Thereafter, there was no lead whatsoever. The group had disappeared and was off the radar once again.

Mr. Choudhury was sure that the team would probably not split and would travel incognito avoiding spots with CCTV cameras such as railway stations, airports, etc. If they were planning to return to China, they would certainly go to Kolkata and from there to New Jalpaiguri and then to Sikkim before crossing over the China border.

But the question is, if they disappeared from Sarnath, then some accomplice must have picked them up by car and they

would travel by road to Kolkata via the Grand Trunk Road. The question was who picked them up and when. A study of the database of Chinese living in Kolkata's China Town was done. A shoe maker turned entrepreneur was among the fifteen odd people under the scanner based on certain indicators. The Kolkata police had visited the houses of all the fifteen families in question and Mr Yin was the only one missing. His wife had said initially that he had gone to the market but surveillance indicated that he never returned. His car registration number was WB-01AX-0020, the very car that crossed several Toll-tax booths on the way to Gaya. This was the man that Mr. Choudhury was especially on the lookout for. Who could he be? Yin?

He wanted to go to Kolkata to investigate this case first hand and take this opportunity to meet his recuperating mother as well. He called his assistant and asked him to recreate the whole probable game plan with whatever evidence was at hand till date. He knew that Mr Yin must have been tipped off by his wife about the police investigations and therefore would be alert and possibly change his game plan every now and then. He would also be in disguise. The investigating agency therefore had to close in very fast. They had fished out his mobile number but Mr Yin was as clever as they had guessed. His mobile had been switched off.

But as luck would have it, it suddenly became alive and was located for a brief period near the small town of Bihar Sharif in the state of Bihar. The tracking team knew that Mr Yin along with the four Chinese 'Tourists' were certainly heading for the capital city of the state of Bihar, Patna, historically known for ages as Pataliputra.

But, why of all places, Patna? They were expected to proceed to Kolkata. Why Patna?

An IPS officer of the same batch, Mr. Thakur was posted in the Special Branch in Patna. He was a childhood buddy of Mr. Choudhury, having studied in the same school. Mr. Choudhury rang him up and apprised him of the situation. Within half an hour the local police swung into action trying to locate Yin's car and his mobile number. Mr. Thakur knew that these fugitives were not arriving as tourists for sightseeing. There was a possibility that they had headed for Rajgir and Nalanda from Bodh Gaya and were about fifty-five kilometres southeast of Patna.

These locations are the sites where Lord Buddha and the twenty fourth Jain Tirthankara, Bhagwan Mahavir delivered their sermons around 427-1197 CE. Nalanda is also the site of the world's largest ancient university where Chinese visitors like Fa-Hein, I. Tsing and Hiuen Tsang (Xuan Zang) had come as scholars. At the time of I. Tsing's visit, there were about three thousand seven hundred monks, ten thousand residents and two thousand teachers in Nalanda University. Students came from distant Korea, Japan and Tibet in addition to China. Literature, Astrology, Astronomy, Buddhist Studies and Medicine were taught in these hallowed portals. This university was ransacked and burned to ashes years later in the 12th century, in 1193 CE, by a Turkish marauder Bakhtiyar Khilji and his Mamluk army. Earlier Nalanda had faced attacks by the Huns under Mihirakula in the 5th century and by the Gauda king in the 8th century. It was from the neighbouring town of Bakhtiyarpur, that Mr Yin had made a phone call using his mobile phone.

Mr. Choudhury asked Mr. Thakur if there were any specific places where illegal immigrants possibly wishing to slip outside, either through Nepal or some other route, come into contact with anyone or any agency involved with manufacture of arms and false documents. Mr. Thakur answered in the affirmative. "We know a few people who

manufacture illegal arms in the “Diara” belts of the Ganges River near the town of Motihari and who hand over these ‘Kattas’ or locally manufactured revolvers in Patna city, a town beside Patna, famed for being the birth place of the 10th Sikh Guru Gobind Singh on the outskirts of the capital city Patna.

Mr. Choudhury asked his office to book tickets for four persons and a separate ticket in the name of Yatin Tamang, alias Tiger, whose approval had to be taken from the police headquarters. He asked them to inform Yatin that he should pack up his bags and be ready to move to Patna the very next day.

Tiger was having a cup of coffee alone in the college canteen, meditating on his half bitten pencil, when he received a call on his mobile. The terse message was to pack up and arrive at IGI airport Terminal - 3 by 9.00 am in the morning, where he would receive his air ticket at the Entrance Gate number - 4. Tiger’s mind was in a swirl. He finished his coffee, kept his note book and pencil in his bag and left the canteen. In the hostel he packed up his bags and rang up his grandfather informing him that he would be accompanying a police team to Patna.”

“Good”, replied his Grandpa. “I trust you will bring back our Buddha we all love and adore. Remember all our eyes are on you now. You are our last hope.”

Tiger next rang his elder brother. “I am leaving tomorrow for Patna on the trail of those who stole our Buddha”, he said. “I’ll keep in touch with you over the mobile. Be sure to keep it on at all times.

Chapter 15: The Journey Begins



Mr Yin's co passengers had noticed the wrinkles on his forehead. In particular, Hong Tao, the one who was sitting in the middle of the backseat. It was not until they had reached Bihar Sharif and Mr Yin had made a call over his mobile that they started to make enquiries.

"Where are we?" asked Mei, the petit girl.

"We are near Nalanda and Rajgir", replied Yin.

"Nalanda? Have we gone off route? And the mobile phone that you are using? Is that your registered mobile number?"

"Yes.", replied Mr Yin.

"Are you out of your mind?" interjected the passenger sitting beside Mr Yin. He snatched the mobile from his breast pocket, took out the SIM card, folded it and threw it away.

"What have you done," cried Mr Yin. "I am not under the scanner."

But his words were not very convincing. He knew the police were on his trail. His wife had tipped him off on that. But he also knew that he did not have a written backup of his wife's number and there was no way to contact his family anymore. Nor could they contact him if needed.

"Things are not going on as planned. First Zhang loses his ID card. Now we are off route and then this idiot makes a phone call from his registered number," said Hong Tao, who had been keeping quiet all this time. "What do we do now?"

“We stick to the remaining part of the plan”, replied Zhang.

It was getting dark. Mr Yin told them that they would be spending the night at a friend’s residence in Patna city before heading off to Kolkata the next day.

“This was not as per plan”, said Zhang. “Should anything go wrong, God forbid, we’ll kill you first.”

Mr Yin could see the distant lights of Patna in the darkness as he drove on the national highway. Suddenly, right there in front of him was a temporary makeshift police check-post. Mr Yin hit the brakes and tried to remain calm and quiet.

“Sheesha neechekijiye” said a havaladar (constable), speaking in the local Hindi language. Mr Yin lowered his glass pane.

“Show me your driving license”, said an officer in uniform.

Mr Yin took out a small bag from the glove box of the car and handed him his driving license, car insurance papers, car pollution certificate and the car-registration papers.

“Mr. Yin, where are you going and what is the purpose of your visit?”

Mr. Yin froze. For a trifle second his head was in a whirl. He quickly composed himself. “Sir, two days ago there was a conference on Buddhist studies organised by the Nalanda International University. I am taking the delegates of that conference back to Patna after visiting Nalanda and Rajgir historical sites and we are returning from these sites.”

The officer flashed his torchlight on the faces of the passengers.

“Ok”, he said, “this is just a routine check. Please proceed. Sorry for the trouble.”

“Ok. No problem,” said Yin, thankful that he was off the hook.

“Phew!” he whistled loudly as he drove away.

The police officer pulled at his wireless set. "They are on their way. Have the surveillance team follow them from the point where the surveillance vehicle is parked on the highway, all the way up to where they will stay for the night. The fishes are in the net. Don't let the net loose. Hold on tight."

About half a kilometre ahead a taxi was parked beside a *Line hotel*— a highway restaurant. Inside the taxi were three officials of the Special Branch in plain clothes with wireless sets and night vision cameras. The description of the vehicle had been texted to them. In about two minutes the car whizzed past them. The surveillance taxi started to follow them at a distance of about fifty metres. After covering a distance of five kilometres the car carrying the tourists turned right towards the town of Patna Sahib. The Special Branch officials followed them silently. As the car entered the urban zone it slowed and went past the sacred Harmandir Sahib Gurudwara temple. It then turned left and entered a narrow road and stopped in front of a two storey building. The officials stopped their taxi at Harmandir Sahib temple and walked up to the entrance of the narrow lane to observe the location of the tourist vehicle.

This house was the one that was among the five houses under their surveillance. Their other team mates were sitting on a bench and sipping tea in a small shanty tea shop at that very location. The Chinese 'delegates' got down from their car and entered the house. Their car remained parked outside. The sleuths informed Mr. Thakur over their wireless set that the rats were inside the trap and they were waiting outside for the next instruction. Mr. Choudhury was immediately tipped off by Mr. Thakur. The big question was whether they should strike immediately or wait till the early dawn.

Mr. Choudhury decided to wait till the early hours of next morning since the purpose of the visit had to be confirmed before getting a warrant of arrest.

Inside the house Mr. Singh made his guests comfortable and served them dinner. He told Yin that the passport and a pistol with a compatible silencer were also ready. Yin smiled though a trace of fear flashed through his eyes. Mr. Thakur instructed his officers waiting outside, to keep a strict vigil till his next order.

Chapter 16:

The Hunting Dogs at Work



Mr. Choudhury and his team caught the next day's flight to Patna. Tiger was uncomfortable sitting next to him. He feared Mr. Choudhury's uncanny ways of fishing out truths from the mouths of others. He feared that he may reveal more than what he should. The staff and the airhostesses had been informed that a special team from the Department of Home Affairs was travelling on that flight. Their guns had been kept in a special locker and would be given only after they reached their destination stop. She was courteous to them all the way. Tiger thought that this was the norm. After all this was his first flight.

Mr. Choudhury said, "In all probability, we may return by tomorrow's flight. We have intercepted them and will close in on them, the moment we reach Patna."

"Oh!" replied Tiger. He didn't expect this sudden turn of events. He had planned to branch off from the team after they would leave Kolkata for New Jalpaiguri and thereafter go his way alone. How would he get hold of the idol if the police nabbed them first. He wanted the idol for himself and his family. He felt that the government machinery was not efficient enough to safeguard it. It must return to the place from whence it came. That sanctum sanctorum in his home had protected it for more than a thousand years.

The airline touched down at the Patna airport and they disembarked and collected their luggage and their pistols and

ammunition. A black air conditioned police car and a van was waiting for them at the arrival gate.

“This way sir”, said an officer requesting Mr. Choudhury to accompany him. Tiger walked behind Mr. Choudhury to the car when suddenly Mr. Choudhury turned and asked Tiger to follow him in the van and entered the car alone.

At the backseat of the car, alongside Mr. Choudhury was Mr. Thakur who insisted that he accompany him to his home for lunch and the other members would be taken to the Government Circuit House where lunch had been organised for them.

Back in Patna Sahib by lunch time no movement had been noticed outside the house under surveillance. The officials were eagerly waiting for their next order to raid the building. By 3:00 pm Mr. Choudhury and his team arrived at the site. Inside the Gurudwara temple an officer had briefed him of the situation. Tiger listened carefully to every word. He knew he could be part of the raiding team as he would be asked to identify the person with whom he had a brief encounter in Janpath road in New Delhi.

At around 3.30 pm they decided to raid the building from three sides. There were roads on two sides and on one side there was a neighbouring house with no space in between. The four officials entered the neighbouring house and showed the occupants their ID cards and requested them to let them go to the roof so that they could jump over to Mr. Singh's rooftop. One team stayed on a side road and the other team rang the bell at the entrance of Mr. Singh's house. A minute later a servant opened the door.

“We wish to meet Mr. Singh”, said an officer.

“Why?” she asked. “Singh ji is not at home.”

“Not here? He was here last night and he did not leave. What about the five guests?”

“There is no one in the house”, she replied and tried to close the entrance door. The officer pushed her aside and entered the drawing cum dining room with his team. Keep a strict vigil. Let no one escape!” he yelled on his wireless phone.

Every room was thoroughly searched. Every nook and corner was combed, but there was no one there. One policeman was guarding the entrance not allowing the maid servant to escape either. The search continued for almost half an hour but was surprisingly fruitless. All possible escape routes were examined. It appeared that they had left the previous night itself, possibly using the roof top to go to the next neighbouring roof and then descending by the drain pipes. Yin’s car was still parked outside the house. The search party informed Mr. Thakur of the great escape and requested for more personnel including officers from the Forensic Department. Their modus operandi had to be unearthed.

Outside a crowd had gathered which was quickly dispersed. Mr. Choudhury sat in the drawing room shocked at the recent unfortunate developments. This was a tactical mistake. These fugitives should have been arrested in the highway itself. Everything that needed to be known would be fished out in the interrogation room and the idol would probably be recovered from them as well.

The second phase of the search would now begin but first a high alert had to be sounded to nab the criminals possibly enroute to Kolkata.

Chapter 17: The Tip Off



Yin had inkling that there was danger ahead on his onward journey, but his face remained impassive. His love for his nephew had forced him to embrace danger and redirect his clients to Patna to get his nephew's false passport and the unlicensed pistol. The tourists knew by then that there was a change of plan and they were disturbed. Change indicated danger ahead. This was the first time in their entire career that they were faced with a complex situation of this sort. But they kept quiet and didn't want to make a fuss of it. They were lucky that they had Mr. Singh as their host. Singh had observed some people engaged in some kind of observational work around his house. He guessed that they were probably waiting for Yin and would strike anytime after their entry and therefore he had made the escape plan accordingly.

The house behind his residence belonged to a friend. He had a taxi waiting there. After dinner Singh had led them to the roof and from there to the neighbouring roof, then down his stairs into the waiting taxi which took them to a railway station that was prior to the main railway junction, the Rajendra Nagar station of Patna. This was a safe location as it was without CCTV cameras. Within half an hour of their escape they were on their way to Kolkata in an unreserved compartment.

Their plan was to disembark at Santragachi railway station instead of the Howrah railway station. By doing this they could avoid their detection through any CCTV footages. They reached Santragachi in the early hours of the next

morning. A yellow Ambassador taxi took them to China Town within an hour. Yin was careful enough not to go directly to his home. He knew that the Special Branch surveillance team were in all probability stationed there waiting for his return. He therefore stopped at a distant relative's house and dismissed the taxi. Mr. Singh on the other hand was glad that the journey was over. He decided to stay there for a day before leaving for Motihari, his hometown in north Bihar. He was used to this kind of a problem. He knew quite a few political bigwigs who could help him wriggle out of this tricky situation.

Back in Patna the Government Railway Police station at Patna junction had been alerted. But there was no sign of the Chinese tourists. By the time it dawned upon them that the fugitives may have gone via the Rajendra Nagar railway station, the foursome must have disembarked at Santragachi.

Mr. Choudhury rarely made mistakes but then his mother was ill and he was disturbed and wanted to be at her bedside in Kolkata. He was of the opinion that they may have entered the state of West Bengal by road through the district of Kishanganj in North Bihar from where they would head for New Jalpaiguri in northern Bengal on their way to Gangtok in the state of Sikkim. He decided to send his team to New Jalpaiguri and go solo to Kolkata when Tiger reminded him of their mission to track down Yin in China Town.

Yin would probably go home first for renewal of his resources before proceeding to aid them to cross the border. This appealed to Mr. Choudhury as he was dying to meet his mother. The Kolkata Police had been alerted and they had even visited Yin's residence in China Town but he wasn't there. His wife had informed them that she had received a message from Yin informing her that he was on a business trip to Bihar. A surveillance team had been stationed near a small shanty shop selling chicken momos near Yin's house.

The search party took the next day's flight to Kolkata. They were received by an official of the Special Branch at Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport, who took them to a guest house in Camac Street. The guest house that was on the second floor had no signage. It looked like any other apartment in that neighbourhood. Only the residents of that apartment knew that a guest house was operating on the second floor.

Mr. Choudhury left his team there and used the same vehicle to go to the Woodland Hospital in the neighbourhood. He went straight to his mother's room and after talking to her for a few minutes rushed to the consultant's room. Dr. Das, the Consultant Nephrologist said that she had been diagnosed with CKD.

"CKD?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"It's an acronym for chronic kidney disease. You see, it starts initially as a biochemical abnormality and if not routinely checked through clinical examination and pathological or biochemical tests, is often missed. Finally, it results in deterioration of kidney function irreversibly resulting in a condition called Uraemia. You are aware, I believe, that she had both hypertension and diabetes. Last week she was admitted here with symptoms of tiredness and breathlessness, anorexia, nausea and vomiting. Her tests indicated her condition as Stage IV."

"I am unable to comprehend all that", said Mr. Choudhury, "Just tell me whether her condition is stable now and whether we can take her home."

"Not now", the consultant continued. "We all know these conditions are end stage conditions in which we can either opt for kidney transplant as you may call it or Chemo-dialysis or even Peritoneal dialysis. The latter is preferable in her case

as she has a few complications and her age is around 85 years.”

“If we opt for the latter, what is the prognosis?” asked Mr. Choudhury. The consultant looked at the reports briefly and replied, “There is an 18% survival rate at 5 years as she is above 75 years. But don’t worry. She’s in safe hands. ”

Mr. Choudhury returned to his mother’s chamber and stayed there for an hour promising to come back soon after finishing his task at hand. He went straight to the reception desk to enquire if there were any pending bills to be paid.

“Yes sir, an advance of Rs 5000 had been deposited earlier. You are requested to deposit another Rs 30,000 before the final settlement of the bills. Mr. Choudhury wrote out a cheque of that amount, signed it and left the building in a hurry.

Tiger was still in his allotted room after reaching Kolkata. He had little idea how far Camac Street was from China Town. He decided to call the guest house attendant and make a few enquiries but then backed out considering the fact that he was on a strictly confidential mission and making local enquiries was not as per the protocol.

The attendant in the guest house was a man by the name of Koirala. He was of Nepali descent whose family had come down from Darjeeling in north Bengal, about 70 years ago and settled in Kolkata. His father worked in a private office and after his retirement had managed to get him a job as an attendant cum janitor in the guest house. This job had given him access to senior officials including police officials for whom he arranged everything from alcohol to call girls. This provided him some extra money that he liberally spent on his daughter’s education in an expensive private school. But otherwise, he was trustworthy, hard working and good at his allocated official tasks. He had an uncanny sense to fathom

what others failed to notice. He saw Tiger and from his non verbal cues knew that though Tiger was part of the police group yet he was not an integral part of it. He mustered up courage and finally asked him, “Sir, are you part of this group or are you on your own?”

Tiger was taken aback. “I am part of the team”, he said. “But why do you ask?”

“Nothing sir, I’m just curious. You appear to be too young to be part of the team.”

Tiger looked hard at him and said that he was surprised at his temerity and that he should leave the room immediately. Koirala replied with a mischievous smile that he was very serviceable and should he need anything, he could ask for it. Anything.

A minute later the room intercom rang and Tiger was asked to report at the lobby as Mr. Choudhury was waiting for him there.

Chapter 18: Gang War



Mr. Choudhury was surrounded by his team in the lobby. He insisted that they all reassemble in room number 102 in five minutes to discuss the further course of action. Room 102 was a sound proof room that had been sanitised of all bugging electronic equipments. It was always kept locked by the police officials. Senior police officers in plain clothes often held discussions there in total privacy with a guard standing outside the room.

Mobile phones had been switched off at different locations by all far from that building and were handed over to Mr. Choudhury on their entry. Mr. Choudhury kept them in the drawer of an almirah kept at a distance from where they were sitting.

“I believe we should form a small team of two or three people and approach the house of Yin. I have a strong feeling that though he may not be there, someone close to him is surely there and he will spill the beans. There will be a back-up team of four people for support just in case something untoward happens and the first team is in danger. Now, who will volunteer to be in which team?”

“I’ll be in the first team”, volunteered Tiger.

Mr. Choudhury wasn’t taken aback. He wanted Tiger to be in the first team. He had read the dossier prepared by the department on Tiger and given his physical prowess and skills, it was only natural that he would blend imperceptibly into the crowd in China Town and unearth the rat.

“Anyone else?” he asked.

“Yes sir, I’ll go”, said Thapa.

Thapa was angry that his earlier attempt to nab Dr. Chan had failed. He was dying to prove his worth to his controlling officer, Mr. Choudhury.

‘Polly Gatto’, Mr. Choudhury’s favourite cop also offered to go, even though he “hated quicky jobs”.

Mr. Choudhury warned Thapa that there was no question of any goof ups this time. He was to meet the surveillance team stationed there. The team had reached China Town within an hour, a little delayed due to the traffic congestion. The place was bustling with people of every denomination. The motley crowd had begun their business in all earnestness. In the din and bustle, walked a small group of three people, two with Mongoloid features walking in front of a group of three. Their faces intent, their feet firm on the ground, but not marching in unison, lest people notice them.

They met the driver of a van that was parked alongside the road leading to Chung Wah Hotel. Some provisions were being supplied to the hotel by an attendant of the van.

“No one has ventured out of the house under surveillance since yesterday evening. Please step inside the van. I will show you photo clippings of a few people who entered the house yesterday evening”, said a crisp voice over the wireless. All the three entered through the back door of the van. Behind a wall of racks filled with vegetables and bread was a table with an official working on a new desktop computer. He clicked on a few buttons and there on his screen was a photograph of two people entering the house a hundred metres from the van.

“Please zoom in”, said Thapa.

As the zoom in progressed, Thapa became alert.

“Chan”, he said, “that’s Dr. Chan the dentist”.

“You mean the dentist who escorted the thieves during their stay in New Delhi?” asked Tiger.

Thapa answered in the affirmative. “This fugitive has insulted and challenged my intelligence. I have never been so humbled and so humiliated in all my life. It’s now my turn to turn the tables on him.”

“What should we do now?” asked Tiger.

“We need to zero in on that house and get hold of Dr. Chan. That snake will lead us to the pit where the mouse is hiding”, said Thapa.

Thapa rarely smoked. But he asked for a cigarette, got out of the van, lit it and inhaled hard. It was not that he was looking for any other evidence from the footage. He was thinking of a fool proof plan. A fool proof plan that would help him restore his worth and dignity in the department.

Everyone on the street was engaged in a brisk business of their own, in the hustle and bustle of the market place and amidst all the noise and clutter sat a youth aged about twenty five years selling Bone China tea cups. He seemed like any other regular guy on the street. Few would realise that here was a youth trained in Pattaya in trafficking of Uzbek women and in international drug dealings. He rose, handed over charge of the shop to an old wizened woman and walked leisurely down the road. But his athletic build and the way he walked attracted the attention of Thapa. Thapa knew instinctively that here was a hardcore professional of the crime world in the garb of a wayside vendor. He decided to follow him down the street even if the youth led him to nowhere.

As Thapa was stalking the youth like a hungry Cheetah stalks its prey, he observed that this suspicious guy didn't seem to care to even look behind to ascertain if anyone was following him. A man carrying a basket full of vegetables soon caught up with him and Thapa's keen eyes noticed an exchange of pleasantries between the two. The youth gave the vegetable seller a small plastic packet which he promptly put in his breast pocket and disappeared into the crowd ahead.

At that point the youth turned around for the first time and looked straight at Thapa. Thapa froze for a moment, looked ahead and at his sides as if seeing or noticing something. The youth started to walk towards him with an athletic aggression. When Tiger saw him, he stepped ahead but Thapa held out his hand and gently pushed him aside. The two opponents were now face to face. Without any warning the youth lunged ahead and tried to kick Thapa on the face but Thapa was a Black belt in Judo and Karate. Despite his age he swiftly moved aside, caught hold of the leg and turned the foot clockwise with the ease of a master. Those nearby could hear a bone crack. The youth fell on the road unable to get up. Thapa's knee was now on his opponent's chest and was asking him as to who he was and where he was heading.

Tiger stood there taking a stance and shouting that this was a police action and no one should step forward. But a sudden kick on Tiger's back threw him forward. There behind him was a short man with mongoloid features. Thapa's eyes scanned him in a fraction of a second and in that split second he knew that this man was of Burmese origin. They were in all probability part and parcel of the drug cartel operating in the Golden Triangle which included Nagaland and Myanmar.

These two guys were previously the top grade commandos in the Burmese Junta army who later shifted gear and transmuted themselves into mercenaries and during recession

times worked for the drug cartels as well. They generally entered India through Nagaland and went right up to Kolkata where there sleeper cell was the backyard of Mr. Yin's house.

Thapa knew he couldn't fight this battle alone. Tiger sprung to his feet. His youthful body was supple and muscular. Years of dedicated practice of Taekwondo had prepared him for occasions such as these. He had also been trained by his brother in commando closed door fights. He flung his left leg towards the short man who staggered back as the foot caught him in the face. Recovering from the blow the Burmese mercenary shook his head side to side and then took his stance.

The officer working on the computer inside the van jumped out and entered the fray. It was now a free for all battle with kicks and blows being exchanged in split seconds. Suddenly Thapa felt something stab him on his left arm. The young drug peddler was holding a six inch knife menacingly.

Thapa started to bleed but quickly recovered and fished out his pistol. A sharp shot split the air and the youth fell on his face. The short man looked at Thapa with horror as he saw his friend collapse. He kicked Tiger once again and fled the scene. A crowd had gathered around the battlefield. Thapa took out his ID card and flashed it to all assembled there, shouting at the top of his voice that it was police action.

"This is a police action", he said. "I want everyone to maintain a distance from this crime scene."

Two policemen in a white uniform arrived at the scene. Thapa informed them that he was on a special mission and was an official of the Special Branch in New Delhi. He requested the police to take the young drug dealer to the police station and that he would also present himself with the paperwork shortly. He advised the computer official to

remain in the van while he and Tiger along with two other officials in plain clothes who arrived on a motorcycle left for Yin's residence which was about two blocks away.

On arrival they scanned the residence and decided to split into two groups. Thapa and Tiger would remain at the entrance while the other two would go to the backyard lest anyone should escape from the rear end of the house.

Tiger knocked the door as the calling bell didn't seem to work. No one responded. He knocked a second time, this time hard enough for all to hear. The door opened and there standing right in front of him was Dr. Chan, the dentist.

"How naive of you to respond to our call Dr. Chan", said Thapa. "I have been tracking your elusive self ever since you disappeared from your clinic in Delhi. Tell us what brings you here?"

Dr. Chan tried to close the door shut but that was not to be as Tiger held out his hand very fast and stopped the door from closing.

"Run!" shouted Chan. "They are here."

Tiger and Thapa rushed in. Tiger caught hold of Dr. Chan's collar and then his right hand with one blow he dropped him on the ground. Thapa rushed into an adjoining room where he had heard some movement. There were two ladies in that room. Thapa rushed and locked the door of that room from the outside. He then went to the adjoining store room where he had heard a can fall. As he entered, he saw two Chinese men trying to hide behind a wooden almirah and two standing right in front of him. Tiger opened his belt and tied the hands of Dr. Chan on his back. He hit him hard on the head and asked him to remain supine on the floor.

Tiger then stood beside Thapa facing the two Chinese thugs, Zhang and Hong Tao. These international thieves were

trained for their job at hand. A fight ensued and Tiger was kicked in the stomach by Hong Tao and thrown out of the room. Thapa returned and hit Zhang on his right leg, dropping him to the floor. In the meantime Hong Tao flashed out a knife.

There was very little space inside the store room. Thapa tried to duck the knife but was delayed by a split second. The knife cut past the left part of his upper abdomen missing his spleen by a centimetre. He began to bleed and he stepped back. He was quick with his gun and in no time shot his opponent in the arm. The two fell to the floor groaning. Tiger in the meantime phoned Mr. Choudhury for back up and was informed that the much needed back up force was reaching shortly.

But where was Yin? Thapa asked Tiger to remain behind and guard them while he would search the first floor. He gave Tiger his gun and ran upstairs unarmed. All the doors on the first floor were open and Thapa searched the room thoroughly. Even the windows of these rooms were closed from inside. The bathrooms were also empty and had iron grills fitted in the windows.

There was only one room locked from the inside. Thapa banged the door with full force. It flung open breaking the brass lock. The room was empty and the window was open. This was the only room without an iron grill fitted in the window. Outside was a bamboo stair. Yin had probably escaped through this unique fenestration.

As Thapa scanned the room for more evidence to plan his future course of action, he heard a car start in the portico and instinctively felt something was amiss. He rushed down the staircase to find Tiger lying unconscious on the floor and the Chinese thieves missing from the scene.

Dr. Chan was also nowhere to be seen.

“What happened?” he asked a groaning Tiger. Tiger did not respond. He had probably been hit on the head from behind with an iron rod that was lying about ten feet away. Thapa rang Mr. Choudhury on his mobile.

“Sir”, he said, “We have an emergency. Tiger needs to be rushed to a hospital immediately.”

“What about the fugitives?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“They have escaped once again”, replied Thapa in an embarrassed tone.

Chapter 19: The Aftermath



Mr. Choudhury took out his cigarette and lit it. He sat back in his armchair and drifted into his occasional pensive mood. He had rarely failed in the past. His mother's illness had taken a toll on his body and mind. This time his plan was flawed, floppy and certainly not foolproof. He felt very sorry for Thapa, his most obedient lieutenant. He should have given more authority to him at the ground level. He should have given him more backup support at this critical juncture.

He picked up his mobile phone and rang up the Senior Superintendent of Police of Kolkata. "Debabrata?" he asked, "The thieves have escaped once again. Please sound a high alert in the railway stations and at the airport. The border road crossings also need to be alerted. We have to nab them at all costs or else I will be pulled up."

"What is their starting point?" asked Debabrata, "Yin's residence in China Town?"

"Yes, there are four Chinese nationals and possibly one accomplice. I have an inkling that they will head for New Jalpaiguri from where they will try to slip into Sikkim through north Bengal. The accomplice is part of the international drug cartel. I understand your office has mapped the routes used by these drug cartels and the possible contact persons on their way. Alert every police station on these points. We have to get hold of them before they reach New Jalpaiguri."

“Ok sir, it will be done”, said Debabrata and hung up his phone.

Mr. Choudhury smudged out his half burnt cigarette in the ash tray and got up. He needed a quick bath and then had to rush to the hospital to see Tiger in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and his mother as well. Back in China Town, Thapa had received the backup support and had shifted Tiger to a hospital where he was wheeled into the Intensive Therapy Unit (ITU). Tiger was hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness when he reached the hospital. Memories of his early life with his grandfather in Sikkim were flashing through his mind occasionally. He remembered him as a very loving old man who doted on him and invariably fulfilled all his wishes and tolerated all his tantrums ever since he was a toddler. Recalling his latest conversation over the phone with him.....“Tiger”, his Grandpa had said, “You must get our Buddha back. He is our family’s heritage, our family’s pride, our love, our God.

Tiger was groaning, “Yes Grandpa, yes Grandpa”.

Tiger was wheeled into the CT scan room and twenty minutes later the technician reported that there was a subdural haematoma that needed an urgent neurosurgical operative procedure.

Mr. Choudhury reached the hospital when Tiger was being wheeled back to the ITU. He gave his consent for the operation which included drilling a hole in the skull and sucking out the accumulated blood below the duramater of the brain to ease the pressure created by it. Within half an hour all the pathological and biochemical tests had been performed and the operation theatre readied for decompressive neurosurgical procedure.

Mr. Choudhury's mobile rang. Debabrata was on the line. "Sir, we have kick-started the surveillance of all the exit points. If you need any other assistance, do let me know."

"Yes", said Mr. Choudhury, "Please send two forensic experts to accompany me to Yin's residence in half an hour."

"Sir, Thapa had got in touch with me from Yin's residence and requested for the same. I had dispatched a team from the forensic department along with our best police sniffer dog and I believe they may have reached the site by now".

Mr. Choudhury asked Debabrata to ensure that the team remains there till his arrival.

It was a hot and humid day in Kolkata as usual. The air-conditioner in Mr. Choudhury's vehicle was malfunctioning and he was sweating profusely as his car drove to China Town. He rang up Thapa who informed him that after initial first aid he was returning to Yin's residence to inform him of the developments there and search for details that might act as clues to continue their search for those who had escaped from their clutches earlier.

As the car reached the site, all eyes were scanning the environment for any tell tale signs. The rooms were tastefully furnished and not necessarily with expensive furniture or upholstery. Yin was obviously well off as was evident from the interiors of his residence but what surprised Mr. Choudhury was his study room. The room was full of books, not only on literature but also on geography and sociology of Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal. There was a desktop computer with a broadband connection and two laptops in an adjoining table. There were a few English newspapers from Myanmar and Nepal. On the wall were maps of the Indian subcontinent with coloured drawing pins pinned on to it like a Spot Map. There were no 'Post It' tags stuck there. Obviously these were in the memory bank of Yin.

The forensic experts began their work with photographic documentation of all relevant and suspected items. Fingerprints were collected. The CPU of the desktop was taken out. All compact disks and pen drives were placed in plastic bags. It appeared as if the occupants of the house had been taken by surprise and had left in a jiffy.

In the corner was a steel almirah with a box in which small plastic bags filled with a white powdery material was found. The plastic bags were sealed. Mr. Choudhury picked up one of them and smelt it. He guessed what it was.

“Heroin”, he said, “We now have concrete evidence to nail Yin down. The big question is where the hell he is?”

Mr. Choudhury’s mobile phone rang. He picked it up. A hospital employee informed him that Tiger had been wheeled out of the OT and would be in the Recovery Room for some time before being shifted to the ICU. Two guards had been deputed outside the room where Tiger had been shifted in the hospital. There was a possibility that the drug cartel may try to harm him.

Mr. Choudhury asked everyone to report back to the guest house. He said that he would be holding a debriefing meeting cum future strategy finalisation at 6:00 pm.

“Let’s get cracking”, he said.

Chapter 20: Escape into Oblivion



Yin was not in his house when Thapa and Tiger had arrived. The four Chinese tourists and Lee, a trusted member of a drug cartel were present. They were packing up their bags when the police arrived at the scene.

Earlier shot in the leg and injured, it would be difficult for them to escape without being detected. They first needed to contact a surgeon to get the bullet injury treated before proceeding further. It was too great a risk to take the injured to a hospital and hence they told Dr. Chan to get the bullet out at the earliest. Dr. Chan, they reasoned, was a dental surgeon who pulled out diseased tooth from the jaws of his clients. He could very well pull out a bullet from the leg. That's common sense. Yin's mobile phone was switched off. They repeatedly rang him up on his mobile phone.

"Stop phoning him", said Meiangrily. "He won't pick up his mobile."

Dr. Chan looked around the room, his head sweating, his temple frowning. "I know where he is at present. The rat has gone into its hole," he said.

"Follow me", barked Dr. Chan. The group silently followed him to the garage. A pickup truck was parked there with a large number of cardboard boxes loaded on it. He asked the others to hide behind the boxes and rang up a local boy, their accomplice; by the name of Shambhunath to come immediately. Shambhunath was a part time truck driver who indulged in petty crimes and drug dealings to earn some

extra money for his mistress who lived in the infamous “Sonagachi”, the red light area of Kolkata. The last time he got into trouble with the cops was when he was caught red handed in a brothel with a Nepali adolescent girl. His photograph had been taken and his fingerprints were in the local police files and their computer as well.

But he was careless and didn’t mend his ways. He needed money and he needed it badly. He picked up his motorbike and rushed to the garage. Within minutes, as directed, he drove off the truck towards Diamond Harbour. There was a small bridge just before one reached Diamond Harbour. About two hundred metres before the bridge, a small non metalled road branched off towards the left. The truck turned left and entered that road and drove on, whipping up a cloud of dust. After another half a kilometre it stopped at a wayside garage that looked abandoned.

The driver got down and asked if they had a spare oil filter. A mechanic who was sitting on a stool in the shade took him inside. There in front of him sat a man reading a one-paged document kept on the table. He was the elusive Yin.

Yin looked out of the window and found that the truck had parked with its back facing the decrepit building that housed him. “Tell them to come down and enter this room quickly”, he said.

Shambhunath went out, opened the tarpaulin cover and asked all to step out and enter the house quickly. At his request all jumped off and entered the house in earnest.

“Yin”, said Dr. Chan, “I knew we would find you here. Your habits haven’t changed over the years.” Yin didn’t reply. His impassioned face stared coldly at his comrades.

“Yin, our friend here has been shot in the leg”, said Zhang, “Dr. Chan has to pull out the bullet at the earliest so that complications like gangrene doesn’t set in later.”

Yin bent down and examined the wound. He rose and went to an adjoining room and returned with a few surgical instruments. The instruments were new but were not sterilised. Dr Chan readied a five ml syringe with lignocaine and injected it around the wound after cleaning it with and the surrounding area with surgical spirit. He then cut the wound a little so that the embedded bullet came into view. Inserting a toothed forceps in to wound he caught hold of the bullet, like he usually caught an impacted tooth and pulled out the impacted bullet. He then stitched up the wound and applied Tincture of Iodine and bandaged it. Once this was over, he wrote out a prescription with a wide spectrum antibiotic and analgesic tablets on a small piece of paper.

“He needs totake rest for some time”,said Dr. Chan,“That’ll help him recover fast.”

“But that’s not possible”, replied Yin cutting the conversation short. “We can’t stay here holed up in this garage for long. The police can be here any moment. We have to move out tonight, if not earlier.”

He was feeling uneasy and was not in a mood to talk, He had no idea that the situation would turn for the worse at this critical juncture. He was certain that the entire group was in grave danger. His small ‘empire’, which he had built up over the years, was crumbling. He actually was on the verge of crying, but he withheld his tears. He knew that he was dealing with a group of very cruel, ruthless and dangerous international criminals who wouldn’t blink an eye before shooting him from point blank range.

“Make arrangements for our safe passage to Sikkim,” he said to Dr Chan. “Damn it, are you listening to me?”

Dr. Chan looked at him with a hint of anger writ large on his face. He replied slowly but firmly, "A private ambulance has been readied. It will take you and the group to the outskirts of this city. From there, a fruit laden truck will ferry you all safely to the bordering town of New Jalpaiguri. From there a certain Mr. Gurung, who is known to us, will transport you all into the state of Sikkim, right up to its border with China."

Yin appeared a little absentminded. "Leave me alone", he said, "I'm not feeling well."

Chapter 21:

Tiger goes missing



Mr. Choudhury left Yin's residence in China town after instructing the forensic team to finish the job in earnest. He was in a hurry to go to the hospital to meet his ailing mother and Tiger. The two guards deputed to guard Tiger were on a local errand in the hot and humid afternoon when they were asked to report to the hospital. It was a welcome call. They could now rest in the cool environs of this 'Super speciality' hospital. Though it was lunch time, they were not given the luxury of collecting their lunch boxes from the police station, but that was not a concern as they could arrange to have it sent there.

When they reached the hospital reception counter, a nurse was requested to show them the room where Tiger had been shifted after his treatment in the ICU. The nurse left in a hurry and a little while later, a ward boy came and told them to stand guard at the door and not to let anyone inside except police officials known to them. If any nurse tried to enter the room, they would have to first enquire from the nurse sitting at the nurse's Duty Station whether she had permission to enter and then allow her in.

About fifteen minutes later, an attractive nurse entered and set up a new intravenous infusion and filled in the details in the Bed Head Ticket. The guards didn't go to the Nurse's Duty Station to confirm whether she should be allowed inside, nor did they bother to enter the room with her. They were looking around to see if there were any spare chairs that they could use.

Tiger was slowly regaining his consciousness. Flashes of his early childhood memories with his grandfather in his native town were haunting him. He was murmuring something unintelligibly. Mr. Choudhury was on his way to the hospital when he decided to have a quick lunch in a restaurant in a narrow lane close to Minto Park. He asked the driver to park the car at an adjoining parking lot and walked down to this restaurant that he often visited as a youth around twenty years ago. This restaurant was old and ancient with cement peeling off at certain places on the outside and had that typically old world British colonial charm. On the inside, he noticed lots of photographs of movie stars of the days gone by on its walls. At the centre was a large photograph of the iconic film director Satyajit Ray, recipient of the Oscar award for Lifetime Achievement for his “Apu trilogy”, the first of them being ‘Apu Sansar’.

As he sat down and ordered a typical Bengali meal comprising of *Gobindo Bhog* rice, *Shukto*, *Sorsediyemaach*, *Potol bhaja* and *Papor* from the age-old menu. He had an inkling that he was being observed closely, perhaps intently by someone. Years of training and experience had given him this sixth sense to detect any stimuli that was potentially threatening to him.

He turned to his right to see a middle-aged woman with her hair down to her shoulders and a pair of expensive Mont Blanc spectacles. She wore no ornaments save for a pair of very small ear rings. She had that typical academic look of that of a college professor who had walked out of a lecture hall after delivering her lecture. But her eyes, there was something anciently familiar about those eyes, the look of those eyes. He recognised her. She was Sanghamitra.

Sanghamitra was the soul of the small group of college youths who clustered together in the campus of Presidency College way back in the eighties. She was very intelligent,

hard working and profoundly talented in performing arts. Mr Choudhury was a member of this group and he liked her a lot, though he couldn't muster up enough courage to tell her that he loved her.

Sanghamitra, for it was indeed her, was still staring at him. Mr Choudhury wasn't that earlier skinny, dark, clean shaven fellow with a bounty of hair on his head. He had put on weight, lost quite a bit of hair from his temples, sported a moustache and looked like an army officer who had returned from his Short Service Commission in the armed forces to join a corporate office.

He smiled back at her to ease his discomfiture and see if she responded. This set the ball rolling. She called a waiter and asked him to enquire if the gentleman was indeed Mr Soumitra Choudhury who had graduated from Presidency College. He didn't wait for the waiter to approach him. He rose immediately and walked up to her holding both his outstretched hands.

"Sanghamitra", he said, "I know it's you".

"Yes", she replied, "I have been wondering all the while whether it's you and look at yourself, you've changed beyond recognition."

Mr. Choudhury waved aside his police officer demeanour and transformed into the young youth he was more than two decades ago. "By a strange and sudden turn of events I had to leave Kolkata and shift to New Delhi", he informed her. "My father was sent on deputation to the Home Ministry there and I couldn't refuse him when he insisted that I should continue my studies in Delhi University. There was no time to inform anyone as we had to board a train the very next day with tickets booked by his office on an emergency basis. My father came back a month later to pack up our belongings and hand them to an official transporter. We didn't get an

opportunity to return for the next five years as one event followed another and my father retired during his deputation period. Now, tell me about yourself. You look like a college professor.”

Sanghamitra laughed loudly. She still had that beautiful, tender smile that she sported years ago and which he liked so much, “No”, she said, “I’m a Chartered Accountant” and I’m working with my husband in his accountancy firm in Minto Park.”

“Who’s the lucky guy?” asked Mr Choudhury.

“Do you remember Prokash?” she said, “Your arch rival who hanged out with us.”

“That bully. He defeated me after all”.

“Defeated you?”

“Yes. You knew that I liked you but never had the courage to say so. I was so shy those days. On the other hand, Prokash was fair, handsome and street smart and you doted on him”, said Mr. Choudhury with a mischievous smile. How come you are all alone in this restaurant?”

Sanghamitra laughed out loudly once again. “Actually, I am waiting for a client who has planned to shift his business to Bhubaneswar from Kolkata as he’s being bullied by a few political big wigs here. He also lost out on a merger and acquisition issue recently. We were handling his tax returns for years.”

“Tell me about yourself. What are you doing nowadays? Tell me everything from the time your life went on a different trajectory.”

“Trajectory?” said Mr. Choudhury as he shifted a little in his chair, and paused a little, “Interesting word”.

“Yes, trajectory”, she said, “You left us suddenly and disappeared into oblivion. You could have informed us. You could have written a letter to us. You just didn’t bother to keep in touch.”

Mr. Choudhury looked apologetic but quickly hid his expression. “It was a tough call to get admitted in a good college there in the mid-session,” he said, “Most of the time, I was running from one college to another putting in an application and meeting the principals. My father with the assistance of a few officials of his ministry finally helped me get admitted in a north campus college. After completing my graduation, I joined Jawaharlal Nehru University and simultaneously started preparing for the administrative services examinations conducted by UPSC. I cleared the exam in my second attempt and joined the Indian Police Service. That’s all.”

“And then you got married to a beautiful and a rich girl,” she smiled mischievously.

“Why are you interested about my marriage?”

“Why not?” she said, “I have a right to know.”

“Well, there was this girl in the neighbourhood in Chittaranjan Park where we lived. She was a Bengali girl who was born and brought in New Delhi. Her grandparents were from East Bengal who had migrated after the partition of India and were allotted a plot of land there. We liked each other and as usual, it was a love cum arranged marriage.”

“Lucky girl”, said Sanghamitra.

“Not so lucky”, replied Mr. Choudhury, she died last year due to cancer that was misdiagnosed and detected in its last stage.”

A gentleman came up to their table. “Nomoskar”, he said and pulled a chair.

Mr. Choudhury pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote down his personal mobile number. “Keep in touch, I don’t want to disturb your business meeting”, he said.

He returned to his table where his meal had been served, finishing his lunch quickly, he slipped out of the restaurant unnoticed by Sanghamitra.

By this time Tiger had regained consciousness and the consultant neurosurgeon had completed his post operative visit. A senior nurse had also visited him and gone through the medical notes and examined his IV-line, pulse and ECG monitor. The oxygen flow was readjusted as per the post operative directive.

The two police constables deputed outside did not interfere too much with the medical personnel who entered the room. They were busy having their packed lunch brought to them from the police station. Half an hour later a junior nurse entered the room and enquired if was comfortable. Tiger gestured that he was thirsty. The nurse removed his oxygen mask and helped him drink a few teaspoonful of water. She left after recording his pulse, BP and temperature.

Soon thereafter, Mr. Choudhury arrived and went straight to the nurse’s duty station. He enquired about Tiger’s condition and then went to his mother’s allocated room. He was happy to see his mother in a better condition. After talking to her for a few minutes, he went to see Tiger in a room near the Neurosurgery ICU. This time a policeman stopped him from entering and asked him who he was and the purpose of his visit. Mr. Choudhury fished out his ID card and went inside.

Tiger was not on his bed.

Chapter 22: Complications galore



Mr. Choudhury opened the toilet door to see whether Tiger was inside the bathroom. He was nowhere to be seen. The window in the toilet was open and had no iron grill of any kind. He wondered if Tiger had been kidnapped by anyone as it was impossible for him to escape. He rushed out and asked the guards if the patient had ever been wheeled out on a stretcher or a wheel chair.

“No sir, we haven’t allowed anyone inside except the nursing staff and the patient has not been wheeled out.”

“Did you see the patient inside the room after your deployment here?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“No sir”, came an embarrassed reply.

“You mean you didn’t care to find out or see whom you two were sent to guard?”

Mr. Choudhury rushed to the nursing station and asked a nursing staff, “Who is in-charge of Room 202?”

A young nurse volunteered and said that she was on duty and it was her responsibility.

“He is not there in the room. Neither is he in the toilet”, said Mr. Choudhury. The nurse was taken aback and not a word escaped her lips. She ran to the room, pushed open the door and stared at the empty bed.

“Impossible! He wasn’t in a condition to get up from his bed, let alone disappear.”

Pandemonium broke loose at the nursing station. Mr. Choudhury rushed back to the room and then to the adjoining toilet once again. He looked out of the toilet window. It was four floors up, but there were drain pipes that could have been used to make good his escape, or was he kidnapped? The hospital superintendent was summoned and all the hospital security personnel were individually questioned if anyone had seen anything unusual. The superintendent was asked to handover all the CCTV footages of that area including the footage of the exit points.

Back at the garage the injured Chinese fugitive asked Yin, “Why do we have to travel in a fruit laden van? Couldn’t you arrange something more innovative?”

“Yes, I could have”, replied Yin. “But remember I am in charge here. I call the shots. This van is your perfect vehicle to escape to freedom. You know why? The reason is that this vehicle is plying up and down this route since the last six years. The driver and his assistant are not only well known at all the checkpoints but is also a favourite trucker of the security personnel at each of these points. They regularly bribe the officials with small basket of fruits. Our group will move through this beaten track. This will be safer than going through the other routes which will be under strict surveillance of the inter-state police. There is only one issue. Just in case surveillance is beefed up and they deploy sniffer dogs on the trail, we then need a backup contingency plan.”

“You mean a Plan-B?”

“Yes”, said Yin, “probably a Plan C, D and E as well. We cannot leave anything to chance.”

“And may I know what is your Plan B, C, D or whatever?” asked Chan.

Yin looked up with his weary eyes through his rimless spectacles. He had that strange look of a frightened fawn waiting to leap away and run into the wilderness, far away from the prying eyes of a black panther.

“These plans are not independent. They are interwoven with each other. First, you all should shed your clothes and take a good bath. Apply the perfume kept in the toilet and wear the new set of clothes brought for you all. Your used clothes and luggage will be despatched separately through two different routes in two separate vehicles. One of these vehicles will be sent a little behind the fruit van for a limited period. None of you will carry any electronic device including mobile phones. You all will be traceless having reverted back to primitive ways of communication. We have a set of informers on this route who have no police record of any kind. Most of them are poor villagers or wayside shanty shop owners. All communications will be through these trusted and time-tested pathways, through word of mouth.”

Yin paused for a moment and then spoke again, “I will alert them once your group departs.” He got up from his seat and walked up to the cobweb filled window. He stared blankly at the distance, lost in his thoughts.

Chapter 23:

The Dogs on the Trail



The two policemen sent to guard were summoned to the local police station.

“You two have been suspended and you will report to the police lines immediately”, said the SHO. The SHO was a burly young man from North Bengal. Nepali by descent he spoke fluently in Bengali and always appeared to be in a hurry.

“Sir”, said the two constables saluting the SHO and stamping their feet loudly on the floor. They turned around and left immediately. The SHO went back to his seat and stared at the ceiling. His home was in Sikkim and he had been sent on deputation in the Home ministry in West Bengal for training in the Criminal Investigations Department. He picked up the phone and rang up the Senior Superintendent of Police.

“Sir”, he said, “As per your directive I have suspended the two policemen deputed in the hospital. I will be studying the CCTV footages for unravelling the mystery of the disappearance of the patient.”

“I would like to know the inside story. Who is this patient? What is his background? Why is he so important to Mr. Choudhury when he is not of the police department?”

The Senior S.P. paused for a moment. “I do not have all the details but I surmise that this patient was probably a police informer of some sort or a person linked with the theft item. The reason for his disappearance is not clear. Probably Mr.

Choudhury was unsure whether he could provide a tight security and feared for his life. He may have helped in his disappearance and now is shouting at us.

“Are you sure sir?” said the SHO. “A senior officer from Delhi would not do so with a cooperating state police official. He needs our help.”

“There is something strange about his disappearance from the hospital”, said the Senior S.P. “A patient who has undergone a brain operation, gets up from his bed and disappears through the bathroom window, four floors above the ground. It seems that the whole operation was carefully planned and executed. I am not sure what I will be able to tell the Inspector General of Police when he rings me up today.”

The phone on the Senior S.P’s table rang. He picked up the receiver. It was the Inspector General of Police.

“Mr. Choudhury rang me up”, he said. “How could this happen?”

“We are looking into the matter sir”, replied the Senior S.P.

“Don’t look. Go and see for evidence yourself. This whole thing is so embarrassing. Our colleagues in Patna were pulled up by the Central Home Ministry for their lackadaisical attitude and now it’s our turn. I want feedback by 8:00 PM sharp today evening. Got it?”

This was one of those bad days the Senior S.P. hadn’t bargained for. It was his marriage anniversary day and here he was forced to go to the hospital, play the role of a forensic expert and then report to that ageing old man in the headquarters. He knew his wife would be mad at him. He was a habitual absconder during the past five years on these much awaited anniversary days. He got up from his chair and went out towards his official jeep. Back at the local police station, the SHO took out his personal mobile and rang up his wife.

“Get the latest update”, he said and hung up. He slid the mobile phone in his trouser pocket. This phone was always kept in the vibratory mode. No one had ever heard it ring. No one ever saw him use it. It was a basic mobile phone, not an Android phone.

On the outskirts of the city the fruit van lumbered on at a leisurely pace. It was a hot summer afternoon but the attached container was air-conditioned to keep the fruit fresh till the delivery point. The cold chain maintenance switch was set at a comfortable 22 degrees Celsius, this time to keep all the Chinese inmates comfortable and safe from the usual hot and humid temperature of Kolkata. Soon the van hit the highway and the driver pressed the accelerator to increase the speed.

On the other side of the city, the SHO was being driven to China Town. He had to meet somebody regarding leads to track down the Chinese fugitives. As the police vehicle rode on, honking its way through the maze of people of China Town, he observed the same bustling activity of the Chinese marketplace. The aroma of their food floated from their restaurants. Red paper lamps hung everywhere. Occasionally a laughing Buddha peered through the window show cases.

There was an old acquaintance from his village near Darjeeling. He was working as a fourth-grade employee in a guest house. His name was Koirala. Koirala had tipped him off that an investigating team had arrived from Delhi and among them, there appeared to be a young civilian in the team too. Someone he had never seen earlier. The purpose of their visit was not clear to him as he was kept away from the ambit of their confidential discussions. But he knew this was something very serious from the look on the faces of the investigators who were staying in the guest house.

The police vehicle stopped at a road crossing. The SHO got down and went towards a small shop selling road side tea. The vehicle moved on. He picked up a newspaper kept on a table in the tea stall and began to read it. The tea seller prepared a small glass of hot tea for him. Sipping the tea, he occasionally looked at a window on the first floor of a two-storey house opposite where he was standing. After a minute or so, the window opened and a young girl looked out of the window towards him and then closed the window.

The SHO finished his tea, paid for it, kept the newspaper on a table and turned towards that building. He went to a side lane adjoining the building and climbed up an iron staircase to the first floor. He knocked at the door which opened immediately and the young girl standing at the window earlier was right there in front of him.

“Hello”, she said, “how long have you been waiting there?”

“About five minutes”, he replied.

“My father will be here any minute. He rang me up about fifteen minutes back saying that he had been held up due to some urgent work”, she said. “Please take a seat. I’ve prepared some snacks for you.”

The SHO got up from his chair and walked up to a large mirror fixed on the opposite wall. He stood there and looked at himself admiring his physique and his dress. It had been a long journey since his childhood in that remote village in North Bengal. He wasn’t from a well-off family. He had to walk miles to reach his school. Books had to be borrowed from his colleagues. Reading in a room lit by a kerosene lamp strained his eyes. Yet through this entire struggle emerged a man who finally managed a decent position in the state government service. And here, he was a SHO in one of the police stations of the state capital of West Bengal.

He turned around and walked back to his chair and sat down. The girl brought a plate full of vegetable chowmein and a couple of fried chicken pieces with soya sauce on it.

“Please have it by the time my father arrives”, she said.

“Thank you”, he replied. “Where do you study?”

“La Martiniere for Girls”, she replied.

“That’s an elite school.”

“It is”, she replied, “but my father manages to pay my school fees by doing some extra work.”

“That’s great”, he replied, “be worthy of his hard work and his sacrifice.”

“I intend to take up the study of medicine after completing school. The medical college fees in a government medical college will be less than the school fees he is paying right now. Besides, I want to take care of him during his advanced age.”

“God bless you.”

There was a soft knock on the door. She opened the door. Koirala was there.

“Hello sir. Sorry for arriving late. I got held up.”

“It’s okay. I got something to eat as I waited for you.”

Koirala opened his cap and kept it on the table and sat down in an adjoining chair.

“You see sir, a day after the Chinese team arrived from New Delhi you had tipped me off to keep a close watch on them. It was probably because you knew that there was a China Town link and since my residence was here, you thought I was the best bet.”

“Very intuitive of you Koirala”, replied the SHO.

“Very little information could be gleaned from them as they were thorough professionals. But there was this young guy, ‘Tiger’, who seemed out of place. But even he didn’t spill any beans. On the day they rushed into China Town to nab a certain person called Yin, I was accidentally there. I saw the street fight and the surveillance van parked about a hundred metres from my flat. I didn’t go down as I feared being recognised by the local people.”

“I know those details”, interjected the SHO. “Tell me about their plan of escape from here onwards.”

“Koirala thought for a moment and then said, “It was incidental that I knew a certain truck driver by the name of Shambhunath. This bugger was a drunkard and often lost money in card games. He played card games in a garage close by. Due to this addiction of his, he often got involved in petty crimes to earn some extra cash. I knew him for years as my motorcycle was often repaired in the garage where he worked. The day he disappeared, I happened to go to the garage to collect my motorcycle and he told me that he would be away for a few days on an assignment. I asked him where exactly he was going and he replied that he had no idea as to where he would have to go. That raised my suspicion. I had his mobile number and I gave him five hundred rupees and told him to inform me of his destination once he was given the details.”

The SHO had a look of surprise on his face. “And you expected him to call you back?” he said.

“I know him for a pretty long time. Till date he has not double crossed me. I trust him. I only fear that this time the crime is not petty. The group could be very professional. They might take away his mobile phone. In that case I will have no option but to wait patiently for his call.”

The SHO got up from his chair and said, “It’s an international gang of criminals; they are hardcore professionals, if they suspect anything they will not hesitate to even kill him”.

Koirala said that this fellow would find out a way to move out on the pretext of going to the loo and call him or send a message through someone else known to him. The police SHO said that he needs to go immediately as he had a pending case in his police station.

“You have my number. Call me whenever you get any information. Here is rupees five hundred that you gave Shambhunath. Keep it.”

As he was going down the stairs his mobile rang. It was the Senior Superintendent of Police on the other side who asked him about his whereabouts. The SHO told him that he was in China Town.

“Come immediately to my office”, barked the Senior Superintendent of Police and hung up. The SHO walked up to his vehicle parked at a distance and drove off. He was thinking deeply on the way as to what he would or should tell his boss when he arrived at his office.

Chapter 24:

The Cat and Mouse game



The first van had hit the highway. It was travelling at a comfortable and a steady speed of sixty kilometres per hour. Inside the van on a small carpet sat the fugitive group in the lotus posture. It was pretty warm outside. In fact, it was quite hot. The driver's cabin had the air conditioning facility. When Shambhunath had switched on the air conditioner button earlier, he had felt a slight jerk. He ignored it. He could see the trees lined up on the side of the highway fly past him. Some of them were laden with yellow flowers, some of which were strewn over the black asphalt. There were some clouds near the northern horizon, but they were far off the circular path of the sun at that time of the year and most of the sky was empty and blue.

Shambhunath began to whistle a popular tune of a Hindi movie song. After about twenty minutes he felt that the temperature inside his cabin was rising. He also noticed that his dashboard meter indicated that his engine temperature had risen considerably. How was that possible? He had checked the engine, its coolant, the connecting rubber pipes. He wondered if the cooling fan behind the radiator had stopped working. He decided to stop the vehicle and check it out.

It was one of those hot, moist and 'sticky' afternoons of Kolkata region. He was used to this debilitating heat as he had been brought up in that environment. He opened a six inches square small window behind him, connecting his cabin to the rear compartment of the van and told its occupants the

he was stopping the vehicle for a short while to check the engine which had heated up.

“Make it fast”, shouted Zhang, “It’s getting hot inside here too. Is there a problem with the air conditioner?”

Shambhunath didn’t reply. He opened his shirt and kept it on the seat beside him. He then opened the door and got down. A blast of hot wind hit him right on his face. He took the towel he had placed on his shoulder and wiped his face and then wound it around his head. He then opened the bonnet of the van and moved away. The engine sure was heated far above the normal temperature. It was steaming. He heard the coolant boiling in the side coolant reservoir container. He knew well that he would have to wait for at least fifteen or twenty minutes before he could even commence to examine the engine.

Back at the police station the SHO checked his mobile phone. He had a message his wife had sent him saying that she had ‘brought the vegetables from the market’. He slid the mobile phone back into his pocket. It was plainly evident that sense of great relief spread across his face. He tilted his chair a little and put his hands behind his head and gazed at the noisy fan above his head. His head too was in a whirlwind.

He was the scion of his family and his parents had great expectations from him. He had struggled a lot to achieve an official position far beyond his modest family beginnings but he longed for more. He wanted to reach for the beyond. He wanted to give back to his humble parents and his little brethren everything he possibly could to make their lives better and more comfortable.

He was suddenly jolted out of his reverie.

“Sahib”, reported a constable, saluting him, “the SP, the Superintendent of Police has just arrived at our police station”.

The SHO got up in right earnest and checked his dress, ready to receive his controlling officer. The SP barged into his room without any formality.

After the usual official courtesies that followed, the SP asked him, “Why did you go to China Town?”

SHO asked his constable to get a Pepsi Cola from the fridge. “Sir”, he said, “I had an inkling that this gang of criminals had a China Town connection. An informer had asked me to come down and meet him there and see things for myself.”

“And what did you hear and see?” asked the SP.

SHO stood silently for a moment and then answered, “Sir, there was a street fight between the drug dealers and Delhi police team officials. My informer was a witness of that incident.”

“Got any leads from there?”

“No sir. But I’ll pick up the threads from there shortly.”

The SP’s mobile began to ring. The IG, the Inspector General of Police was on the other end. He heard a cryptic message. “Yes sir. I’m coming right away sir”, he said.

Rising from his seat he said to the SHO, “You are on deputation here. Do a great job if you wish to get a good Confidential Report from our side before you return to your home state and keep me posted of all the developments each evening at 6.00 pm sharp.”

“Yes sir”, said the SHO, He knew that he had one hell of a tough job ahead of him.

END OF PART ONE

Chapter 25: Return of the Dragon



In an apartment on the outskirts of Kolkata, in Rajarhat, on the sixteenth floor, the window curtains had all been pulled over. In the darkened room was a large sized double bed with a man lying on one side. A nurse came and sat on a plastic chair beside him and said, “I have brought some soup and two slices of brown bread. Shall I help you sit up?”

Tiger slowly sat up on the bed without any assistance resting his head on the head stand of the bed. “Thank you, sister, for helping me get me out of the hospital”, he said, “Where am I at present?”

The nurse didn’t answer him directly as he expected.

“I have already informed my sister’s husband”, she said, “He’ll take over from here.”

Her mobile rang. The caller tune was different from her usual tune that rang at all times. The number displayed was unknown. Was it her sister’s husband calling? She didn’t know.

“Yes, who is calling?”

“I’m coming home at 5.00 pm. Hope all is ok over there. Is Tiger in a position to talk now?” said the voice from the other end.

“Yes, he’s ok now but he cannot take a lot of strain. By the way, whose phone number is this? It seems to be a landline number.”

“I’m calling from a pharmacy landline phone very close to your hospital. I’m going to the hospital now and from there, I’ll reach home. Bye for now.”

“It would be better if....” She could hardly complete her sentence before the caller, the Station House Officer, her husband, hung up.

She needed to tell him where the CCTV footages could have picked up the “drama” of Tiger’s escape. She immediately redialled the number from which the call had come.

“Hello”, she said. “Is the man who called just now from this landline still there?”

“No”, said a woman from the other end. “He just left.”

“Please call him. It’s very urgent.”

“Sorry madam, he boarded his vehicle and he’s gone.”

The nurse put her mobile down with a sigh. She should have discussed this with her sister’s husband earlier. What a fatal mistake! She sat down on the bed beside Tiger and started texting her husband regarding the CCTV locations and other lookout points.

As the vehicle sped towards the hospital a message ring tone alerted the SHO. He opened his message box to see three CCTV locations that needed his attention. The window of his vehicle was open. The wind was blowing through his hair as he gave a faraway look. Occasionally braking and honking his vehicle gradually advanced through a medley of cars, station wagons, the famed Ambassador taxis, the last remnants of the Morris vehicle of United Kingdom and the city buses. Finally, his vehicle stopped just short of the large portico of the hospital. There was an ambulance parked at the portico. It appeared that a man who was seriously injured, probably in a road traffic accident was being taken out of the ambulance

and was being shifted to the 'JoruryBivag' or Emergency Department.

The SHO got down and asked his driver to park the vehicle on the side of the adjoining road as he would be moving out soon. As he entered the lobby of the hospital, he noticed a tall burly man looking at him intently. He had a newspaper in his hand and a small red leather briefcase by his side. He could be anyone, but his athletic built and the peculiarity of the man's gaze alerted him. He was trained to detect signals such as these.

PG or 'Polly Gatto' put down the newspaper he was reading, picked up his briefcase, got up and started advancing towards him. The SHO slowed down and stopped midway.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm from the Special Branch in Delhi", replied P.G. "I need to talk to you for a moment."

The SHO motioned him towards a room adjoining the duty sister's room. An attractive petit nurse was standing nearby. He showed her his ID and told her that he would use the room next to her for a few minutes. She appeared to recognise him and nodded. The two entered the room and shut the door behind them.

Far away in the dusty hot village the first van had been parked beside a wayside motel. It was only about a quarter of an hour since the van had stopped, but it was getting uncomfortably hot and stuffy inside. There were no windows from which they could peep outside, nor were they sure whether they could call the driver on his mobile. Switching on their mobile could tip off the police surveillance team on their mobile location tracking system from any of the two nearby mobile tower coordinates. They decided to wait for

another ten minutes before one of them would first open the backdoor, peep outside and then see what the situation was.

The driver Shambhunath had opened the engine bonnet only to find that the engine was extremely hot and the coolant in the reservoir at the side was boiling. He thought it would be unwise to open the top screw stopper of the radiator and the best possible option was to keep the bonnet open and let the engine cool down for about half an hour before he could examine what had happened. He had walked down to the roadside motel for a cup of tea and to carry back some water in a bucket which he could spray on the radiator from the front and from the top.

The motel wasn't one of his favourite spots, but the cook of that roadside restaurant was known to him since the last two years.

"Shambhu da", the cook said, "I haven't seen you for a pretty long time."

"Yes", said Shambhunath, "I generally stop at Krishna's motel nowadays which is about five kilometres ahead on this route. This time the engine got heated up and I had to stop. He looked all around as if with a casual gaze, but his eyes were actually surveying all around him. He was weighing the pros and cons of bringing the Chinese 'tourists' out, lest they feel suffocated and uncomfortable inside the van. After finishing his tea he slowly walked down to his van and unlocked the backdoor and then as if casually, walked away towards the nearby bushes to urinate.

The door opened slightly and Lin peeped out. He was dying to get a breath of fresh air. Towards his left he saw the driver urinating in the bushes.

"Hey", he cried out. "What's the matter?"

Shambhunath glanced over his shoulder. He knew he was courting trouble but he didn't show it. He turned slowly, pulled up his trouser chain and walked back towards the rear door of the van.

"The engine has got super heated. The air conditioner is malfunctioning as a result of it. I don't think there is any danger here. You all might as well come out, relieve yourselves near the bushes and have a cup of tea in this wayside restaurant. Once the engine cools down, I will check the radiator, the fan and the coolant level and will do what is needed to restart the van."

Zhang went inside and discussed the matter with his team. "The situation is hopeless. We will all die inside the van. We will have to take the calculated risk of exposing ourselves. There is no option."

They all got down and went towards the bushes. After 'relieving' themselves, as they say after answering the call of nature, they followed the driver to the roadside restaurant. The cook had seen the group coming and was curious about these foreigners who had emerged from the locked up fruit van. He however didn't say a word. Shambhunath saw the look on his face and wanted to dispel his curiosity.

"You see", he said, "I was travelling when I met this group on the way, they were stranded as their vehicle had broken down. They insisted that they be given a lift."

The group went in and took a corner table. The four 'foreigners' sat facing the wall to avoid recognition. Shambhunath ordered snacks and coffee for them. None of the group members were talking. Hong Tao picked up a newspaper from the table and flipped through its pages. It was an English newspaper. Shambhunath got up to go and examine the engine. He took a bucket of water and a mug and started spraying water on the radiator from the front and the

top. Once the engine cooled, he opened the radiator cap and found that the entire distilled water and coolant had dried up inside the radiator. Since there was no distilled water available in his van and anywhere nearby, he poured water from his bucket into the radiator. He then glanced back at the team sitting in the corner of the restaurant. Wiping his brow with a portion of his shirt, he closed the bonnet, picked up the bucket and headed towards the motel. It would be dangerous to linger here any longer.

A car came and stopped near the motel. In the car were a family of four. A man, his wife and their two daughters. The elder daughter was aged around twenty years and was fair and attractive. Shambhunath couldn't take his eyes off her. The family settled down in a centrally placed table directly under a noisy fan.

They ordered three bottles of soft drinks and a cup of coffee. The cook took the orders as the restaurant bearer was not available at that time. When the soft drinks and coffee arrived, the gentleman picked up his cup of coffee, got up from his seat and came out of the dining hall and lit a cigarette.

"Dad, you know that cigarette smoking is injurious to health", said the elder girl.

"Is that so? My coffee will nullify the effect of the cigarette. Don't worry", he replied, smiling to himself.

"In such situations, epidemiological studies will treat coffee as a confounding factor", laughed the elder, attractive girl.

Chan was listening to this conversation. She may be a medical student or an intern he surmised.

"Shambhu", said Zhang "Is the vehicle in a condition to proceed?"

“Yes, let’s go”, replied Shambhunath. “The radiator had run out of coolant and water. I’ve replenished it.”

They got up and moved turning their heads towards the opposite side. Gliding past the gentleman who was smoking outside, they entered the van from the rear and were gone within a minute.

Chapter 26:

The Springing Tiger



Tiger got up slowly from the bed and proceeded towards the toilet.

“You shouldn’t get up from your bed”, said the nurse softly, “Your condition is still very critical”.

“I have to”, replied Tiger, “I have a promise to keep. A promise I made to my grandfather.”

The nurse supported him as he walked slowly towards the toilet and on reaching the toilet door, opened it and helped him go inside. She then went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee for herself. Tiger emerged from the toilet after a lapse of five minutes and immediately started to pack his backpack. He then fished out his mobile and dialled a number. It was his grandfather’s mobile number.

“Hello, grandpa”, he said. “I’m injured and recuperating. I remember the promise I’ve made to you. I’m leaving for New Jalpaiguri today by train. Please send someone to pick me up at the railway station and help me move on incognito.”

“I’m worried about you my boy. Tell me in detail about your injuries, I can’t wait to see you”, His grandfather’s voiced was choked with emotion, his eyes glistening with tears. He was trembling. “Come home soon”, he said.

“Don’t worry about me”, said Tiger. “Am I not your ‘Springing Tiger’? I’m coming to recover our stolen Buddha”. Tiger loved his grandpa more than anyone in the whole universe. His grandfather too loved him with all his heart and

gave him his unconditional love. Tiger sensed that there were tears in his grandpa's eyes and he couldn't bear to see that. He hung up his mobile phone wiping his own tears.

"I'm coming grandpa", he murmured to himself. I'm coming. I'm coming to get our beloved Buddha from those thieves".

The nurse walked into his room carrying a few medicines and a glass of water. "Who helped you plan my escape?" asked Tiger. "Was it this SHO?"

The nurse helped him sit down and took a seat herself.

"The SHO is my sister's husband. We hail from the North-East. A village close to Rangpo in Sikkim. Your grandfather was his mentor during his early years. We were poor and it was he who discovered the spark in him and decided to fund and support his education. He was more than a father to him. He was literally his God.

"Oh! I didn't know that", replied Tiger.

"Your father was also like a brother to him", said the nurse. "They both called him up and informed him of the stolen Buddha, your family's heritage, once the gang reached Kolkata. They asked for his health and support. My brother in law is on deputation in Kolkata for training. He is very intelligent or cunning should I say, and highly skilled in martial arts, though he appears to all as a foolish guy. He can also put on any guise within minutes. Sometimes I feel, that he should have been an actor in the movies", she said laughing loudly.

"He had planned everything to nab the criminals in China Town and he would have succeeded if Mr. Choudhury would have kept him in the loop but then things went horribly wrong. You were seriously injured and saving you and planning your escape became a top priority for him."

Tiger was listening to her with rapt attention. He didn't blink an eye. His head was aching like hell and so was his back. He decided to lie down for some time to ease the pain.

"Can I get to meet him", asked Tiger.

"I am not sure, but I will talk to him regarding this", replied the nurse.

"He has sent a backpack for you. He said that it contained a 'survival pack' inside it. The kind of stuff commandos use. You can have a look at its contents once you feel better. At the right opportune time I will give you his personal mobile number."

She finished her cup of tea and got up. "Take these tablets that I have given you. Do you need another glass of water?"

Tiger wasn't listening. His mind was in a whirl. He was thinking hard. Really hard. He would have to travel alone to New Jalpaiguri incognito. The train route would be too dangerous as the surveillance cameras in the railway stations and the Special Branch officials in plain clothes would be waiting to pounce upon him. By this time it was an open secret that he had branched off from the police team. He started wondering..... Did he do the right thing in branching off at this stage and heading in search of the elusive family heirloom like a Lone Ranger?

He really didn't have much of an option. His grandfather had planned all this. He was just a pawn in this cat and mouse game and it was up to him to do what needed to be done.

Mr. Choudhury leaned back in his chair and stared hard at the S.P. "There have been too many goof ups in this search operation", he said. "The way Tiger disappeared from the hospital is unpardonable."

“Vanished?” the Superintendent of Police smiled back. “All this time we were thinking that it was part of your game plan and you didn’t keep us in the loop, for reasons best known to you.”

“My game plan?” Mr. Choudhury shot back. “I’m running all the way from New Delhi to nab the fugitives, soliciting help from all the local police stations in three different states.....” He paused for a moment. “Look, this is a very high profile case. We’ve been chasing them through U.P., Bihar and now in West Bengal and each time they are one step ahead of us and now there’s another complication. Tiger has disappeared from the hospital. Do we have the time to investigate his disappearance or do we go after the fugitives?”

S.P. smiled once again. “It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well have not lived at all.”

“Quoting J.K. Rowling?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

S.P. looked at him smilingly. There was a glint of sarcasm in his eyes. Mr. Choudhury sensed it.

“We’ve formed two teams, our two best teams to track the two issues. They will be in constant touch with each other and with me.”

“Tiger was sick, really sick. It appears very unlikely that he was able to plan and execute his escape on his own. There are two possibilities. One, for reasons not clear as of now, someone wanted to remove him from your team as he was an asset for you. He belonged to the North East, specifically Sikkim. He knew about the idol, the possible routes that these thieves may take, he knew the local language. Removing him would amount to literally cutting off your right hand.”

“The second possibility, which appears a little improbable, is that, he has branched off and has gone for the booty on his

own. Like a police dog he will sniff them out and then strike. Working with a group may be an impediment for him. Maybe he didn't trust your team."

"What about the CCTV footage?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"Footage shows a nurse taking a trolley from the adjoining room towards the exit. There was a white bed sheet draped over it. Tiger was probably hidden in the lower shelf of the trolley. The footage on the outside doesn't cover the drain pipes descending down from the toilets from which he could make possible his escape. The trolley was taken from the hospital to a private van in the portico by an attendant. We have the van's registration number, but the attendant has proceeded on leave. He's untraceable."

Mr. Choudhury got up from his chair and looked out of the window. Kolkata was his birthplace. His childhood memories flooded him as he gazed into the distance. Brushing these thoughts away, he turned to the S.P. and asked, "Are you tracking that fruit van?"

"Yes, we are trying to track it down. Our CCTV camera at a road crossing near New Town has recorded its movement towards Rajarhat. Our men are on it."

There was a knock on the door. Mr. Choudhury looked up. SHO entered and saluted both of them.

"Sir", he said.

"Sit down", replied the S.P. "Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Choudhury, our senior officer from the Special Branch in New Delhi."

"Sir, I have heard a lot about him. His reputation precedes him. His home is also in Kolkata and hence a lot of people happen to know him", replied the SHO.

He sat down in an adjoining chair. His body language displayed submissiveness before his superiors.

“Sir”, he said, looking at Mr. Choudhury. “I met one of your men in the hospital and we surveyed the disappearing scene together. Tiger, it appears was wheeled out on a stretcher from the adjoining room which obviously means that he must have escaped through the toilet window, probably alone, and entered the other room through its toilet window.

We made enquiries about the nurse, but it was inconclusive. Her face couldn’t be clearly discerned. I have the CCTV footage with me. Would you like to see it?”

“That won’t be necessary now. You leave your pen drive and we’ll see it later”, said the S.P.

Mr. Choudhury interjected, “What’s the update on the Chinese nationals? Have they been seen at any of our suspected locations? And their mobile location?”

The landline rang. S.P. picked it up. “Sir”, a voice from the other end said, “I’m from the C.I.D., A van carrying the Chinese has been seen in a Line hotel or highway restaurant between Krishnanagar and Behrampur on the Kolkata-Siliguri route about half an hour ago.”

“What kind of van was it?” asked the S.P.

“A fruit van Sir”, replied the man at the other end.

“And the driver’s name is Shabhunath.”

Chapter 27:

The Cat and Mouse Game



The journey between Kolkata and Siliguri was a long one. It could take up to twelve hours by road and getting detected enroute was a distinct possibility. The van lumbered on. Hong Tao had felt that following the beaten track could endanger them. A family of four had seen them in the motel and should they come into contact with a police team, their presence would be detected. He discussed this with Shambhunath in English. Shambhunath too had felt that the route also passed through three states and a combined combing operation by the police of these three states would make things more difficult for them. He had a contact in the Sadar block of Pakur town in the state of Jharkhand, who assisted him smuggle in drugs from Bangladesh. The area was a Muslim locality and even the local police rarely dared to enter the dense maze of houses in the villages there. It would provide them a resting place till things quietened down. Wearing a hijab or a burqa could also help them avoid being detected by the locals.

His mind was in a dizzy. Inside the fruit container it was getting stuffy again. The air conditioner was probably not working again. The blower wind was getting hotter and the fruity smell and humidity was getting on his nerves.

Back in the motel on the highway, a police team was interrogating the cook. They took down detailed notes of the description of the van and its occupants, including the driver.

“In which direction did the family go after their meal?” asked an official.

The cook pointed towards Kolkata.

“How long have they left this dhaba?”

“About twenty minutes ago Sir”, replied the cook.

“Give us the description of the car they were travelling in.”

“It was a white Maruti Dzire Sir.”

“I guess we did cross such a car on our way sometime back”, said the official to a tall man standing a little further away. P.G., for it was he, was in a pensive mood. His mind was trying to figure out the game plan that he had to enact. He walked a little closer to the motel cook.

“See the pictures on my mobile phone”, he said. “Were these men in your hotel some time back?”

The cook replied, “Sir, these pictures are slightly hazy but it appears that they are them alright.”

“These pictures are from CCTV footage and zooming them has made them hazy, but their size and shape are distinct. You are sure it’s them”, said P.G.

“Yes sir”, replied the cook.

He called up inspector Somnath of Team B that was following them.

“Somnath, stop a white car heading towards Kolkata and interrogate its occupants regarding a group of Chinese nationals they had seen in a motel, where they had their last meal.”

He put his mobile phone in his breast pocket and walked out of the motel precincts.

“Let’s go”, he said, “this team is on its way to Pakur. We have to nab them before they enter this northern town in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand.”

Chapter 28:

A Long Arduous Journey



The van lumbered up a road that led to Littipara village in Dumka district of Jharkhand. Shmbhunath felt that hiding in that non descript village would give them some time to plan their next move while they erased their footprints and disappeared from their determined track. Luckily their vehicle had not been checked or intercepted at any point near the interstate border by the police.

It was gradually getting dark. The van drove past a long line of Eucalyptus trees and then turned right; leaving the highway to enter a small narrow path that went passed a government Primary Health Centre located amidst the paddy fields. About half a kilometre ahead of them, was a small village with a row of thatched roofed houses, like the ones you once saw in rural West Bengal. The van finally stopped near a modest size house that was located amidst thick foliage and trees.

“Shambhunath, what a surprise”, called out a voice from among the trees in that twilight.

A man of medium built, potbellied and dark skinned, wearing a printed ‘lungi’ and a weathered singlet came out as if from nowhere. Shambhunath greeted him and said that he needed his help. He told him that he had undertaken a secret mission and that he and a few people would be staying overnight at his residence. They would leave very early the next morning.

“Look, I don’t want any further trouble”, replied the dark skinned villager. “A day after the last time you visited my

home, the police picked me up for interrogation. They locked me up and questioned me for well over four hours.”

Shambhunath told him, “One last time brother. Just one last time. I will repay the debt with a handsome amount this time.”

He opened the backdoor of the van to let the ‘Chinese tourists’ out. The dark man stared in amazement at this foreign group. “Where on earth did you get them? Who are they?”

Shambhunath told him that should anyone ask him later, he would tell them that they were tourists whose vehicle broke down on the highway and had asked for his assistance. They are from Gangtok in Sikkim and were looted on the way by a gang of highway robbers. Since he was going to New Jalpaiguri with his fruit van, he decided to help these tourists. Shambhunath gave him two thousand rupees for their overnight stay. The dark man considered the proposition. It was a lot of money for him and the villagers may not have seen them and may not suspect anything anyway. Shambhunath requested him to prepare some dinner, saying that he was willing to pay separately for that dinner too.

The van inmates came out of the van angry and fuming, but didn’t utter a word.

“What the hell is going on? Where are we?” said Lin in a low voice once they entered that rural dwelling.

Shambhunath appeared flabbergasted. He replied, “I had an inkling that our footprints had been picked up by the police. You never know. That highway restaurant cook and that Bengali family had seen you and may have already spilled the beans. I had no choice but to change my course and enter the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. Fortunately, no one checked us at the interstate checkpost nor are there any CCTV

cameras that may have recorded our entry. We will stay here for the next couple of hours and then proceed if all seems well."

"Enough!" shouted Zhang. "This return journey is too badly planned and there's danger lurking at every turn. I will kill you if anything goes wrong."

"You don't have much of a choice, do you?" replied Shambhunath. "Besides I have been part of a drug cartel operating in this region for the last one decade. Don't take me to be a novice. You're in safe hands. Now, rest for the night after dinner and we will proceed tomorrow either in the morning or in the afternoon."

Mr. Choudhury left the Superintendent of Police office and went back to his hotel room. He took out a map and scanned it to work out the possible routes that the fruit van may have taken. He was joined by his assistant shortly, who appeared to be in a hurry.

"We need to change our gameplan now", said Mr. Choudhury. "There are two teams or rather one team and one individual that we have to track down and I believe, both are following two different tracks which may or may not be the beaten tracks people normally take. The only way is to intensify our surveillance on all the possible paths that lead to New Jalpaiguri. All paths, no matter whether they are circuitous or often not tread upon. We also need to alert the police informers in the villages where the drug cartel operatives carry and store their 'stuff'."

Mr. Choudhury knew that the family that he had intercepted and who had seen the Chinese group at the highway hotel had more or less confirmed that they were the ones he was looking for. He had the fruit van driver's mobile number whose last location had indicated similar coordinates. He was on the right tract.

“All we need to do now is to zero in on that fruit van”, he murmured.

“And what about Tiger who has abandoned us?” asked P.G. “We need to remember that he is a lone operative now. He may or may not take a public transport. In addition, he may or may not follow the beaten road track. He is entering into his own familiar territory. He probably knows a lot of local people who may provide him with shelter and food. But I am pretty sure of one thing. He will be waiting for these Chinese thieves in New Jalpaiguri. That should be a focal point of heightened surveillance.”

Mr. Choudhury leaned back on his sofa. He was a relaxed man now. His mother had been discharged from the hospital and he had made adequate arrangements for her care at home.

“We can’t goof up this time”, he said. “Our long tortuous journey must end in New Jalpaiguri.”

Chapter 29:

Two Paths Diverge in the Woods



Tiger knew that his scent had been picked up and started contemplating whether he should reconsider changing his route or his game plan. His mind was in a dizzy. He put on his goggles and his cap and entered a small grocery shop near the apartment he was recuperating and which had a landline at the cash counter. He scanned the shop to see if he was under CCTV surveillance. He proceeded to ask the man at the cash counter if he could use the phone, when suddenly he held himself back. He decided not to call from the shop as the police would soon swoop down to the shop and ask for a description of any man who had used the phone at that designated hour.

He got into an auto rickshaw and proceeded to the nearest taxi stand. He didn't want to book a radio taxi as that would have left a distinct trail. Once he boarded the taxi he directed him to go to Sealdah railway station. After half an hour, he reached a non descript restaurant near the railway station. He asked the driver to stop, paid the fare and proceeded towards that small restaurant. There at its entrance stood a man of medium height with a white skull cap on his head and eyes lined up with a dark eye liner and a finely trimmed three inch long beard protruding downwards from his chin. "*Salaam walekum*", said the man to Tiger.

"*Walekum salaam*", Tiger replied. Both entered and diverged. The man wearing the skull cap sat on a small table at the corner of the restaurant facing the door while Tiger entered

an adjoining toilet- the 'ladies' toilet'. A bearer came to take the orders which the man ordered immediately without a pause. Four minutes later a medium built 'woman' wearing a burqa walked out of the ladies toilet and came and sat opposite the man sitting at the corner.

Both ate the food that was served within a few minutes, paid the bill with a small tip and left quietly for platform number 3 of the railway station. They boarded an unreserved compartment of a train for New Jalpaiguri with unreserved tickets. The train departed in half an hour.

Tiger in the ladies burqa dress maintained a lugubrious silence. No ticket examiner arrived till 10.00 pm. When the ticket examiner finally did arrive, the Muslim gentleman wearing the skull cap requested him to upgrade the two tickets to a reserved compartment, softly hinting that he would pay a sum of money, in addition to the up-gradation fee, for his generosity and help.

"Ok. I am the ticket examiner till New Jalpaiguri station and that won't be an issue, as there are vacant berths in the adjoining sleeper compartment. Both of you can shift 'unofficially' to berth numbers 34 and 35. Just give me five hundred rupees"

Aslam Khan, for that was what he had said his name was, paid an extra rupees five hundred and left with Tiger walking demurely behind him, to occupy the allotted berths in the adjoining compartment. Their bed rolls arrived after they paid the coach care taker and extra fee. Unbundling them and making their beds, they laid down and fell asleep. It was around 6.00 am in the morning that they got up from their berths. The lady in the burqa spoke in a quiet whisper to the man wearing the skull cap. They packed up their bags and got ready to disembark.

The train stopped at a small railway station. They got down and walked out of the exit door of the railway station. Suddenly a ticket collector stopped them to check their tickets. The lady in the burqa stood demurely behind the man. They then walked out at a leisurely pace and took a three wheeled auto rickshaw from the auto stand. Just ten minutes after their departure from the rail platform, a police jeep pulled up at the railway station. “We are looking for a man of medium built and muscular body. This is his photograph. Have you seen him get down from the train?” asked a policeman to the ticket collector standing at the entrance.

“No”, replied the ticket collector. Only a Muslim couple and a family of four that I personally happened to know disembarked here.

“But you haven’t seen this couple before or know them?”

“No.”

“Look at this picture again. Did the man look like this one in the picture?”

“No.”

“What about the woman? Do you remember her face clearly?”

“She had a veil. She was wearing a black burqa with a hijab.”

The policeman turned to one of his colleagues. “We can’t take any chances”, he said. “It could be him, all right.”

“Did you see them boarding any vehicle?”

“No. I was on the platform but you could ask the other auto rickshaw drivers waiting there.”

“That we will”, replied the police officer. The investigating team rushed out and started questioning the drivers who had assembled at a tea shop.”

“Yes sir”, replied one of them. “The couple boarded Mintu’s auto rickshaw about fifteen minutes back. I will give you his mobile number if you need it.”

Tiger knew that the surveillance team could detect them and their location at any moment now. He had seen the police vehicle whizz past them towards the railway station. His mind was in a whirl. He signalled his companion to ask the driver to stop the vehicle immediately. The three-wheeler vehicle stopped near a long row of shops.

“We need to do some shopping before we proceed towards our home. We don’t want to keep you waiting. What’s the fare to this point?”

“Thirty rupees”, replied the auto driver.

Having paid him the fare they entered a narrow and congested lane and disappeared amidst the crowd. At a shop in the distance the two waited at a shop at a distance behind a pillar till the auto rickshaw driver got another customer and sped off. They then got out of the lane from the other end, walked up about two hundred metres to another shopping area and from there, hired another auto rickshaw.

Mintu the former auto rickshaw driver received a call on his mobile. One of his colleagues informed him that the police inspector wished to talk to him. The man at the other end of the phone handed over his mobile to the police officer.

“Were you carrying a Muslim couple in your auto rickshaw?”

“Yes sir, they disembarked only a minute ago in the main market area. They were supposed to go further, but then, they said that they had to make some purchases.”

“Do you know the shop they may have entered?” asked the officer.

“No sir, is there anything wrong?”

“Give me the exact location where you left them. We are heading towards the main market. You also reach that point immediately. We need to track down that couple soon.”

Tiger motioned to his companion to ask the second auto driver to stop around two hundred metres away from a railway yard. They paid the fare asked for and went towards the railway yard and started crossing the railway tracks quickly. Midway, they found an empty train which had offloaded coal, starting very slowly but surely. Losing no time they boarded an empty container and were gone within a few minutes.

Chapter 30: At the Break of Dawn



The goods train finally entered New Jalpaiguri's railway yard and stopped. Tiger rubbed his eyes as he got up from his slumber. His hands had blackened with coal dust. His companion's skull cap and clothes were also black with coal dust. He tried to dust it off but in vain. They got down from the train and went straight to a small railway staff quarter earmarked for the train guards.

Pushing aside the latch of a small iron gate they entered the official quarter of Mr. Abdul Salim who was sitting on a plastic chair in his parlour. The room was very sparsely furnished. He got up and the two sat on a cotton woven mat kept on the floor.

"Abdul Bhai", said the man wearing the skull cap. "Henceforth you are the guardian of this young man. Help him track down a few Chinese fugitives and also help reach his home town in Sikkim." Tiger wearing the burqa was standing near the door.

Abdul's wife who was intently listening from behind the curtains went to her kitchen to prepare tea for her unknown guests. When she returned, only a lone woman in a black burqa was sitting in her parlour. Her husband and the male guest had gone.

P.G. despite his experience in the police department was clueless as to where the 'duo' had disappeared after entering the gully between the shops. He made enquiries as to where the woman wearing a burqa along with a man had gone, but to no

avail. He surmised that in all probability they were hiding somewhere in that small town or had gone to New Jalpaiguri via the road route. He was about to call the local police station, when an incoming call stopped him from doing so.

“It’s me, speaking”, said the voice at the other end.

“Yes sir”, replied P.G.

“From my calculations, Tiger may have already reached New Jalpaiguri railway station. You and your team probably missed him.”

“No sir, we missed him only by about ten minutes. He is probably lurking in the shadows here in this very town. We’ll try and nab him tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t linger there any longer. By tomorrow they will no longer be there”, replied Mr. Choudhury.

True to his words the duo was no longer there. They were in New Jalpaiguri.

Chapter 31: Flight to the Hills



Tiger opened the burqa and hijab revealing himself in a faded jeans and trouser and a printed collarless T-shirt before the amazed wife of Abdul.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Before Tiger could answer her question, Abdul entered the parlour and motioned his wife to go inside. He sat back in his plastic chair and looked at Tiger with an expressionless face.

“Do not venture outside. In all probability, the police are out there hunting for you and the Chinese fugitives. “Tiger nodded.

“I’ll go to the station right away”, said Abdul, “and study the situation. Take a bath and have some lunch. After dusk, I’ll arrange for your transport to Gangtok in a large trunk perched atop a bus.”

“It’s a four hour journey”, replied Tiger. “I’ll freeze to death in that trunk.”

“That you may, but is there an alternative? Besides, I’ll keep a warm quilt inside the trunk which you may wrap up. There are a few holes in that trunk. You won’t suffocate. There will be a person travelling on that bus. He’ll get that trunk down and let you outside where he has been instructed.”

“Why don’t you drop me off just inside the Sikkim border, near Majitar, where some of my friends are studying in an

engineering college. I'll stay with them in their hostel before moving on from there."

Abdul's wife was right behind the curtains listening to the entire conversation. Little did she realise that she was putting herself in great danger by knowing this game plan.

The fruit-van had left the village very early in the morning and was moving north. The road went straight ahead towards a police check post. There was a small road that sharply turned right to enter a wooded area. Shambhunath turned right and stopped his vehicle and asked his passengers to disembark and walk through the rice fields towards a forest, thick with foliage on their left side.

"There is a police check post right ahead. It will be very dangerous for you all to remain in this vehicle. I want that you all should move through this forest and wait for me near a small bridge just a kilometre from here. Walking briskly, you will reach there in about twenty minutes."

The team got down and walked hastily through the paddy field. Shambhunath got into his vehicle, returned to the main road and drove straight up to the police check post.

True to his guess, he was stopped there by a potbellied policeman with a moustache.

"The officer wants to see you", he said.

Shambhunath got down from his vehicle and went to an adjoining ramshackle house that served a police post.

"You are the fruit-van's driver?" asked the police officer looking up to him from the kerosene lamp that was on his table."

"Yes sir."

"We've information that you are carrying some Chinese thieves in your van?"

“No sir”, replied Shambhunath. “You may check my van.”

“That we will. But tell me, if they aren’t in the van, where are they?”

Shambhunath froze for a moment. He was thinking hard.

“Sir”, he answered. “I won’t lie to you. It’s a fact that a few Chinese tourists had taken a lift from me in my van. They informed me that they had been looted by highway robbers and the looters had fled with their taxi and its driver. They urged me for a lift to the nearest railway station since they had no money. Seeing their plight, I gave them a lift to a point near the Dumka railway station.”

“Check his vehicle”, said the policeman as he rose from his chair picking up the kerosene lantern from the wooden table in front of him.

He looked at Shambhunath closely as the light of the lantern lit up his face.

“Are you Shambhunath by any chance?” quizzed the policeman.

“Yes sir.”

“Son of Kedarnath Mondol?”

“Yes sir. How come you know me?” asked an amazed Shambhunath.

“You went to Khidirpur Middle School, right?”

“Yes sir”, replied Shambhunath. He wondered how these details were known to the police officer. Were they waiting for him there? They obviously had done a good background check. His heart missed a beat. Drops of sweat appeared on his brow. A cold shiver went down his spine.

“*ArreShambhunath!* Your face is still the same since our school days”, said the smiling police officer. “Don’t you remember me, Rajib Das? I was with you in school.”

“Rajib! Oh my God. It’s you. Where have you been all these days?”

The two long lost friends embraced each other.

“We had received a specific order to intercept a fruit-van. Just see how providence has brought us together once again”, said the officer.

“I am not the one you were expecting to intercept”, replied Shambhunath who opened the back door of the van. A police *hawaldar* entered the van with a torch and searched each corner. He shouted out that there was no one inside and the van was empty. He climbed down from the van and was asked by the police officer to get two cups of tea and some biscuits from a shop across the road. Soon both started sharing their notes. Shambhunath was smiling at the sudden turn of events.

“Rajib *bhai*”, he said, “I have to reach New Jalpaiguri by midnight. Enroute I may be stopped again by other police personnel on the lookout of a fruit-van. Kindly tell them my vehicle number and request them not to stop me and it’s another fruit-van possibly behind me.”

Rajib assured him that he would tell his colleagues over the van and requested Shambhunath to spend a day with him on his return journey. Shambhunath nodded that he was overjoyed at this encounter and assured him that he would be spending a day with him here despite his busy schedule. He climbed up the van and switched on the engine and disappeared out of sight towards the bridge ahead of him where his passengers were asked to wait for him.”

Chapter 32:

Action in the Hills



Mr. Choudhury had flown down to Bagdogra airport and was engaged in a meeting with police officers in Siliguri, when the fruit-van stopped near a row of shops in New Jalpaiguri market.

Unknown to Shambhunath, there, about two hundred metres behind him, stood a Jeep vehicle. Its inmates were looking through a binocular towards the vehicle. After purchasing two loaves of bread, a packet of butter and some tea in a flask, the fruit van proceeded towards the Sikkim border. The Jeep followed maintaining a distance of one fifty to two hundred metres. Half an hour in an artificial forest created by the Forest Department, the fruit-van stopped. The Jeep vehicle stopped a little distance behind the fruit van this time, around two hundred and fifty metres, near a tea shop.

There was thick foliage near the fruit-van. When Shambhunath opened the rear door, the van occupants quickly jumped out and disappeared in the bushes. Tiger who was watching from the Jeep vehicle behind, spoke for the first time. "It's them", he told his driver. "Let's go a little closer to see if they are leaving the vehicle to go further through the woods."

The driver started the vehicle and was about to proceed when a police vehicle overtook them and stopped near the fruit van. Tiger instinctively put his hand on the driver's shoulder to stop him from proceeding further. He was intently observing what was about to happen like a crouching tiger. A few

policemen got down and went up to the driver of the fruit van asking him to step out.

A surprised Shambhunath stepped out asking the officer what the matter was all about.

“You’re Shambhunath? You are coming from Dumka in the state of Jharkhand?”

“Yes sir”, my vehicle has been checked and the case investigated in a police station in Dumka. I have informed them that the Chinese tourists who had boarded my vehicle had got down at the railway station there.”

“You’ll have to come to the police station to give a detailed description of your so called ‘tourists’. “But sir, I was not involved in anything. These tourists said that they have been looted and asking for a lift, I didn’t even ask them for any money in lieu of the lift I gave them.” He paused. “Besides, I have to reach Gangtok by 3.00 pm to deliver my goods.”

“Open the back door”, barked an officer.

Shambhunath got down and meekly opened the back door of his van. One policeman entered and inspected the van and its contents, shaking some of the fruit boxes.

“There’s no one inside sir”, he shouted.

The police officer asked a policeman who was accompanying him to board the van and ordered Shambhunath to follow his police vehicle.

The Chinese fugitives were still hiding in the thick foliage, not moving a muscle. They were watching the whole scene with hawk eyes. Once the van turned and sped away behind the police vehicle, they rose and slowly proceeded towards the highway to see how far the vehicle would go.

“What’ll we do now?” asked Lin. “Abandoned here, we may be detected any moment.”

“The police finally closed in on us. The return journey didn’t go as planned. It was not a foolproof plan and the driver was an idiot. What should we do?” asked Hong Tao.

“I think it’ll be too dangerous to linger here and wait for the driver to come back and pick us up. You can be sure that the police may leave the driver, but they’ll be keeping a close watch on his movements till he reaches Gangtok. We should therefore branch off from here on our own.”

There from the distance, Tiger saw two people emerging from the bushes and standing beside the highway. “It’s them all right. Let’s go for the kill.”

The Jeep vehicle drove up to them. They made no sign to ask for a lift, but the driver stopped his vehicle. “Do you want a lift?” he asked, “You appear to be tourists”.

“No”, Zhang replied. “We are waiting for the bus.”

It was at that moment Mei spotted Tiger sitting inside the vehicle. Her eyes widened. Memories of the fight with Tiger in China Town in Kolkata flashed vividly before her. She caught hold of her companion’s arm and began to run back into the foliage. Tiger leapt out of his vehicle and ran after them. “Run, run, run”, shouted Zhang in his Mandarin language, pushing aside the leaves and small branches that came his way. The ground ahead started to slope downwards with an occasional rock jutting out of the ground. There, right below them, about five hundred feet further below flowed the mighty Teesta River, roaring, jumping and circling around the rocks. Now, caught between Tiger and the fiery waters, the team had no option but to turn back, Zhang pulled out a pistol.

Tiger barely had time to react before Zhang shot at him. The bullet whizzed past him tearing his jacket, grazing and bruising his right upper arm. The sound of the shot wasn’t

very loudly heard as the roar of the river had masked its sound. Tiger froze for a moment holding his right arm with his left hand. Ignoring his wound, he pulled out a small pistol that he had pilfered from a policeman prior to striking out on his own. He fired two shots, one at Zhang and the other at the one standing beside him. A sharp cry ripped through the air. Zhang pulled back and looked downwards. There about fifty feet below the point they were standing, was a small temple, which looked old and deserted. All started racing downhill towards the temple with Tiger close behind them.

By then, Mr. Choudhury had reached the New Jalpaiguri police station and was now waiting for the fruit van driver to arrive. His mind was sharp despite his age. His body was athletic but there were signs of tiredness and a slight laid back attitude could be observed in his body language. The police jeep vehicle pulled up at the portico of the police station and the fruit van driver, Shambhunath was asked to park his vehicle near a banyan tree that doubled up as a small worshipping site for the Hindu police personnel. Shambhunath was asked to go and sit in the waiting area. A little later, he was escorted to a small, dark dingy room that in all probability was used as an interrogation room. His unbearably long half an hour waiting period was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Choudhury who pulled up a wooden chair and sat opposite him.

“Describe the people who took a lift in your van”, he asked firmly.

Shambhunath was accustomed to being interrogated. But this time he sat up straight on his chair.

“Sir”, he replied, “I was driving along the road when I was stopped by a group of Chinese tourists. They in broken English said that they had been robbed by highway robbers and their taxi taken away by hooligans.”

“Do you think I’ve come all this way to hear this shit from you,” barked Mr. Choudhury angrily. “They were not tourists and you knew that”

He shouted at a ‘havaladar’, “Tie up his legs and hang him upside down”.

Two policemen caught hold of Shambhunath while a third tied up his legs. They then hung him up upside down with an inch thick rope.

“We’ve gone through your dossier and a CCTV footage to prove that you are part of the organised gang that is involved in transporting them to New Jalpaiguri,” said Mr. Choudhury in his slow baritone voice. “You have a lot of questions to answer including the reason as to why you changed your route and entered the state of Jharkhand instead of remaining in West Bengal.

“Sir, for God’s sake leave me. I don’t know a thing”, cried Shambhunath as he struggled like a large sea fish hung up by a rope on the deck of a fishing vessel.

“You’ll talk all right, you bastard. You’ll talk and remember, the sooner you do, the better.” Mr. Choudhury left the interrogation room to climb up to the Assistant Sub Inspector’s (ASI’s) room on the first floor. He asked him if a team had been sent to the railway guard’s residence in New Jalpaiguri Railway colony where an unknown man wearing a white skull cap along with a woman wearing a burqa were reportedly seen entering. The ASI said that the GRP (Government Railway Police) officials had sent a police officer to make necessary enquiries. He’ll talk to them again if there’s any feedback.

There in the railway colony the policeman was interrogating the only occupant in the official quarter, the wife of the rail

wagon's guard. As expected, she was terrified and she had said all that she had seen and heard.

"Yes, sir", she said, "A man wearing a skull cap and a woman in a burqa had arrived. The woman in the burqa didn't speak at all. Some kinds of arrangements were being made to transport them to Majitar in Sikkim, atop a bus. That's all I could hear. That's all I know."

"Who was going to assist them in this transportation?" asked the policeman.

"I don't know," she cried, "I was asked to go to the kitchen by my husband. 'I couldn't hear a thing from the kitchen'".

The police officer asked her to accompany him to the railway police station "We've detained your husband there and he'll fill in the blanks. Come immediately or I'll have to arrest you."

Chapter 33: In Hot Pursuit



Tiger had seen the guard's wife listening to his conversation with her husband from behind the curtain. He had therefore changed his plan from travelling in a truck atop a bus to a Force vehicle that sometimes operated as a taxi for the tourists. He had been tipped off by Peter, a friend who had joined him in NJP railway station about the exact location of the fruit-van.

Mr. Peter, an Anglo-Indian who had chosen to remain India instead of migrating to Australia, was working in the Special Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department in Krishnanagar, West Bengal. Earlier, he was working in the Directorate of Vigilance & Anti-Corruption in Kolkata. He still had his contacts in all major towns of Bengal particularly in the route from Kolkata to Siliguri. He was tracking the fruit-van from his place of posting through his local contacts and had kept the information only to himself. Luckily, he had been tipped off when the van crossed Behrampur and later Pakur in the state of Jharkhand. He reached English Bazaar by his personal car to apprehend the vehicle, but then missed catching them as the vehicle had changed course midway and entered Kishanganj in the state of Bihar. Finally, he caught up with them in New Jalpaiguri.

He was now in the Force taxi with Tiger.

When Tiger had been shot at by Zhang, he could no longer sit like a mute witness in his vehicle. He pulled out his revolver and rushed towards him. He could now see the

Chinese thieves moving swiftly down the steep slope towards a small temple. Tiger motioned to him to follow them from a slightly longer route with occasional rocks here and there that probably for millennia, served as stepping stones by the tribal of the region.

Suddenly they were nowhere in sight. Both Peter and Tiger were rushing down the slope. Occasionally their downward motion had to be slowed with their left leg as a brake and using their arms to catch and hold on to the neighbouring branches and shrubs. Finally both of them zeroed in at the small temple. It looked solitary, abandoned and uncared for. It was a roughly built temple with local rocks and no plaster on its walls. A small Shiva-linga stood as a lone sentinel in that temple, far from the madding crowds. Inside the temple, dust, leaves and broken twigs littered its floor. A cobra snake, camouflaged amongst the leaves suddenly hissed up its menacing hood as the two neared its entrance.

The eerie panoramic scene of the area was torn apart by the roar of the Teesta river and the rustling of leaves of the trees all around. Suddenly, they observed a midsized rock rushing and tumbling down towards them from above. As they looked up, they saw the Chinese nationals, this time climbing up the hill. The rock had been dislodged by the leg of one of them. Tiger soon realised that they had been tricked. Like two panthers in their demarcated home territory, Tiger and Peter began climbing up the hill towards the escaping thieves. But that was not to be. They had gone far ahead and climbing up was more difficult, as the soil loosened due to the recent heavy rains in the region.

Occasionally a rock uprooted itself out like a 'milk tooth' as Tiger and his friend stepped on them climbing up the steep slope. Despite his training, Tiger found it hard to match the dexterity of his fleeing Chinese counterparts.

As they climbed ahead, Zhang, Hong Tao Mei and Lin reached the point that was at the level of the road ahead. Soon they were scrambling through the thick foliage, pushing them away to reach the road.

“Run, run, run!” shouted Zhang in Mandarin. Panting and running the group reached the road just in time to stop a car in which a family of three were travelling.

Flashing their pistols the group overpowered the family and pulled them out of the car. There was no time to lose. Delay by a few seconds could cost them their lives. The visibly shaken family sat down holding each other. The group got into the car and sped off. By the time Tiger and Peter reached the road, they had disappeared from sight.

Tiger was flushed with rage and at the same time almost in tears. The duo lost no time in running rapidly towards their parked vehicle. The amazed driver knew something was wrong, very wrong. But the sight of the armed duo rushing towards his Force vehicle sent a chill down his spine. He had seen the fugitives board the car that was stopped ahead of him and they had fled towards the Sikkim border. He knew that his job was now to catch up with them, no matter what.

Mr. Choudhury was being briefed by the ASI regarding the questioning of the railway train guard's wife in New Jalpaiguri and subsequently of the interrogation of the railway guard, in which he had filled in the blanks.

“The man in the skull cap was a road side meat vendor in Howrah, Kolkata who doubled up as a cocaine smuggler at night”, said the ASI. “His son was a student in Delhi University where Tiger had befriended him during a ragging session and provided him care and support. His name is Jamil Asghar and he once visited his son in Delhi and Tiger had allowed him to use his roommate's bed and stay with him for two days as his friend had gone home to visit his ailing

mother.” He continued, “The man in the burqa was Tiger, a student of that university.”

“Stop”, said Mr. Choudhury, “I know him well. I can pick up the threads from here.”

Mr. Choudhury got up from his chair and climbed down the stairs to re-enter the interrogation chamber. A visibly panicked and sweating Shambhunath saw him and cried out for help.

“Sir”, he yelled, “I’ll talk. I’ll tell you everything. Just tell your men to stop beating me up. Please tell them to stop beating me and untie me.”

Chapter 34: The Spilled Beans



By the time Shambhunath completed his epic tale, Mr. Choudhury had pieced together the scattered bits of this jigsaw puzzle. A little while later, a sub-Inspector, Rakshit by name, of the North Bengal Police department entered the interrogation room and whispered to Mr. Choudhury, “My guess was correct sir. It’s Tiger who ‘pinched’ my service revolver for sure.” Mr. Choudhury looked at him disinterestedly. He couldn’t care less. It was now a game that he was probably losing.

“Nothing will make me happier than to kick the butt of that bastard and recover my revolver”, Mr. Rakshit continued. Without a word Mr. Choudhury got up and walked up to the veranda to board his vehicle. He stopped short of opening the door of his vehicle and turned around.

“Rakshit”, he said, “I’ll need help. I want you to track down Tiger, while I go after the Chinese and the treasure.” Mr. Choudhury knew that this was the last leg of his journey. Frustrated by this “Tom and Jerry” chase spanning quite a few Indian states, each large enough to rival some of the European countries in sheer size, he knew it was a matter of a day or two before the fugitives could cross over to China. They would like theoretical astronauts, disappear beyond the Event Horizon of a super massive Black Hole. By letting loose Rakshit behind Tiger he had a better chance to pinpoint the location of the booty, that revered stolen Buddha using two vantage points or co-ordinates of a possible triangle.

Without wasting any further time, the two proceeded towards Rungpo right at the border of Sikkim with the state of West Bengal. It had been decided that Rakshit would begin his search from the engineering college campus located there and Mr. Choudhury, who would later be joined by P.G., would go by the directives of local informers regarding the possible movement or location of the Chinese group.

Near the Sikkim border, Rakshit got down from his vehicle and boarded a shared taxi in Rungpo that offered to drop him at Majitar for a mere ten rupees. Mr. Choudhury saw him depart and then asked his driver to drive up to the state border check-post.

Tiger told the Gorkha driver to speed up his vehicle and try to get it in close range of the stolen car. The serpentine road was difficult to navigate at high speed. On one side was the mighty mountain slope and on the other, a drop of about a thousand feet to the roaring wild Teesta River. A minor mistake in judgement while driving could endanger the lives of all the occupants of the tracking vehicle. Miles after miles of the asphalt slipped back under the wheels but the elusive car was nowhere to be seen. Tiger was no longer restless. He had assumed a yogic posture with his hands on his knees and was breathing slowly and deeply. Peter at this point spoke for the first time after a long hiatus.

“I presume that the fugitives did not go by road to Gangtok. Enroute there is a point where the tourists go for river rafting. I guess these Chinese fugitives may abandon the stolen car at that point and go ahead by the tourist river rafting facility.”

Tiger didn't reply. His lugubrious silence was disconcerting to Peter. After an hour's drive they stopped at a turn. “Sir”, the driver cried out, “that stolen car is parked right ahead. “As they drove closer to the vehicle, they realised that there

were no occupants inside it. Tiger climbed down and reached for the door handle of the car.

“Wait”, shouted Peter. “Don’t touch the car. The forensics will need the fingerprints.”

Tiger took out his handkerchief and opened the door. The car keys were still hanging in the ignition switch. The keys were not swaying.

“We don’t want them to pick up your trail to this point”, said Peter. “That would be suicidal.”

“We got only about eight to twelve hours in our hands. Once those robbers reach the border, I bet, their contacts will come and help them cross over and we on the other hand will be shot with bullets.”

While they were conversing, a few tourist vehicles and a bus crossed them. Some of the occupants, particularly the children waved at them. One tourist jeep stopped to ask them if anything was wrong with their vehicle and if they needed any help.

Instinctively Tiger was going to refuse, but stopped himself from doing so.

“Yes”, he said. “We’ve ran out of gas. Would you be kind enough to drop me off at the next petrol station where I can buy some petrol?”

“Hop in”, said the driver.

Tiger was hoping that if he could reach the starting point of the river rafting facility, incognito, he could catch them before the police did.

He waved to Peter, and boarded the other tourist taxi. Peter locked up the abandoned car and kept the key in his pocket. Just as when he was about to board his vehicle, a police jeep came and stopped near the car. A man along with his wife and

a girl stepped out and told the police officer that this was indeed their stolen car. For a moment, Peter froze. He then took a deep breath, relaxed his muscles, put on a smile and walked up to the officer and fished out his identity card issued by the police department.

“I’m Peter. I’m an inspector in C.I.D and stationed in Krishnanagar.”

The officer shook his hand firmly. “I was on my way to Gangtok on a personal visit when I saw this car being stolen. I decided to follow the thieves who had mongoloid features, possibly locals and nab them. They appear to have abandoned the car here and fled. Here, take the car keys.”

He handed over the car keys to the officer. The family was relieved that they had found their car. The officer turned to them and said that they would have to go to the nearest police station to complete certain formalities before the car could be handed over to them. He requested Peter also to accompany them. Peter knew that this would delay his journey forward. He had to do something. He spoke up.

“You go ahead officer. I have some urgent work to do. I’ll come in the evening and give my statement.”

“Ok”, replied the officer, “See you in the evening.”

Within two hours Mr. Choudhury reached the police station where the stolen car was parked. He interviewed the family and as expected, the description of the car jackers matched that of the Chinese thieves that he had been relentlessly pursuing. The police by this time had also questioned the shopkeepers of a row of shops about 100 metres ahead of the point where the car had been abandoned. One of them said that a group of four backpackers had got down from a car, stopped a tourist bus, and boarded it. They said that the

tourist bus first stops at a starting point of river rafting for about an hour and a half and then proceeds to Gangtok.

Tiger had got down at a gas station. Thanking the taxi driver he proceeded to the fuel filling point. There he talked to one of the motorcyclist awaiting his turn to fill up his tank and requested him to give him a lift to the point where the river rafting starting point was located. When Tiger finally reached that point, there was a huge crowd of tourists. Tiger swiftly moved through the crowd searching for the fugitives. Tired of searching, he finally went to the booking counter.

“Did a group of four Chinese tourists book tickets for the ride?” he questioned.

“Yes, some time ago, probably twenty minutes”, the clerk replied.

“What was the boat number?” queried Tiger.

“Let me see”, the clerk flipped through his ticket booklet. “I’m not sure but they may have boarded boat number six. I’m not sure as there are two counterfoils with four bookings.”

“Give me a ticket”, Tiger requested.

“That boat is leaving right now”, said the clerk. “There is space for one. You can board that.”

Tiger lost no time in boarding that boat.

By the time Peter reached the booking counter, Tiger had already left. From a vantage point far above he had seen Tiger wearing a blue shirt boarding a boat. He had even shouted to him to stop him but his voice was lost in the din and bustle of the zone. Peter thought that it would be futile to pursue Tiger as the Chinese in all probability would not return from the end point and neither would Tiger. The four Chinese “tourists” with Tiger, like a search or hunting dog

behind them were now lost for some time in the hills and forest of Sikkim.

He turned back and headed towards the police station where he had promised to report, hoping that he could find some leads that he could convey to Tiger, should he be able to contact him in some way.

Chapter 35: Through Waves and Frothy Waters



In those tumultuous blue waters foaming with froth and small whirlpools, far from the frill of the shallow bordering shallows, the air filled boat bounced and danced its way ahead. Tiger was careful to sit at the back of the boat wearing his life saving jacket. He was wearing a cap, just in case the fugitives, who had moved ahead, identified him from any vantage point in the surrounding hills. The journey was bumpy and the air was filled with shouts and shrieks of his excited co- passengers.

“How long is the ride?” asked a tourist to the sports adventure guide sitting beside him.

“About twenty minutes”, replied the guide.

Tiger kept quiet throughout the apparently perilous journey through the madly rushing and swirling waters all around. In the relativity of time, the wild adventure appeared to be longer than the designated twenty minutes. All the occupants on the rubber boat were in the present moment. Neither dwelling in the past, nor in the future. But Tiger was anxious to get down and track down the group of thieves in the hills. He knew the area well like the back of his hand. This was his territory, his homeland, an area he had ventured into before and it would be a great sport to hunt them down.

The boat finally reached the point of return. There was a small clearance with a few shops selling tea, biscuits and a few local memorabilia. Tiger opened his life jacket and quietly left it on the boat unnoticed by others.

“Is there a toilet nearby?” he asked the guide, as if he was new to the area.

“No”, said the guide. “You just go into the nearby bushes away from the bank of the river.”

Tiger walked slowly into the neighbouring bushes and disappeared in the thick foliage ahead.

Chan was using a GPS to move forward. They had reached a school where they met a Jesuit father who offered them some snacks and tea. Father Kevin was intrigued by their presence, as he had never come across tourists trekking through the hills and the forests of that region. He however did not express his surprise, neither did he question them.

The group requested him to guide them on their journey ahead towards the next village en route to Gangtok. Father Kevin took out an old map from his cupboard and showed them a less taken path through the hills running parallel to the Teesta river. Thanking him profusely after understanding the route, the group trudged ahead carrying their small backpacks on their backs.

When Tiger didn't return after his pee, the adventure tour guide became anxious.

“Where has he gone?” he shouted.

“Who?” asked his assistant.

“That young man who said he needed to go to the toilet and I sent him towards those bushes.”

The two rushed towards that direction apprehensive that something may have happened to him. They searched in all directions pushing aside the leaves and the branches and the foliage with their hands, but he was nowhere to be seen. They panicked, fear writ large on their faces.

When they returned to the boat, a fellow tourist asked as to where he may have gone. The guide said that he had no idea and hoped that nothing had happened to him. Two fellow tourists offered to help search him. They along with the guides went deeper into the woods this time and a little uphill. There were some stones that served as steps on the climb ahead. As they went further, it grew darker and with little sunlight peering through the thick foliage above and around, they decided to descend and resume their journey back to the starting point.

“We’ll report the matter to the police on our return”, said the guide. They switched on the engine attached to their inflatable boat and headed back towards their starting point upstream. All through the return journey no one spoke a word.

Tiger knew the terrain like the palm of his hand. This was his home territory where he knew every up and down, every tree, every rock. There were a few occasions when he and a couple of his friends escaped from the hostel of St. Anthony’s school and reached the boating end point. He was muscular and athletic and like a young leopard, he ran and jumped from one point to the other till he reached the rear facing wall of his school. He climbed the wall with ease and headed straight for the room of Father Kevin, the school hostel warden during his time there.

Incidentally Father Kevin had left his room to go to the Chapel for his evening prayers. Tiger found his room locked and asked a young boy who was possibly returning from his football match as to where he could find Father Kevin.

“He could be in the chapel”, said the boy. Tiger lost no time to reach the chapel. Buddhist by faith, he nevertheless had great reverence for Jesus and Christianity. Often his grandfather spoke of how Jesus had left Jerusalem and had

come to India and was exposed to the teachings of both Hinduism and Buddhism. How these teachings had influenced Christianity. How Christianity was a distant echo of both these two great ancient religions.

Someone was playing the musical organ inside the chapel. The soft evening sunlight filtered through the multicoloured stained glass windows forming mesmerising kaleidoscopic beams of light that created a carpet like pattern on the wooden floor. The soft melodious tunes floated through the air and rekindled old memories of his days as a student there. As Tiger entered the prayer hall, he saw Father Kevin kneeling on one of the front desks. Without a word he sat down on the last bench looking at the image of mother Mary and her beloved son Jesus on the small brass lined altar.

All his worries disappeared like a flight of birds in the evening dusk. A sense of calm descended upon him and it was as if he were in a reverie. As if by soul guidance, Tiger suddenly realised that he was a mere witness of the cosmic drama around him. Like watching a movie in a theatre. As if his individual identity and ego were only a figment of his imagination. Like coordinates in a geometric space time dimension. He was just another wave among millions of other waves, tossing in the infinitely expansive sea of phenomenal existence. As if life was the dancer and he, was the dance form itself.

The musical organ stopped and Father Kevin rose slowly from his prayers. As he inched close to the door, he noticed Tiger sitting in the rear seat. The years gone by had not dimmed his memory. He came and put his hand on his shoulder and softly said, "Tiger." Suddenly awakened from his supernal meditation, Tiger got up and shook his hand. Both left the chapel quietly. Father Kevin was very happy to see him after such a long hiatus and insisted that he stay over in the school dormitory for the night. Tiger confided in him

and told him the whole story, requesting him to keep the information to himself.

“I need to track them down Father”, he said. “They will cross over the border in another twenty-four hours. I have got to stop them and recover our revered idol. Our stolen Buddha.”

“Don’t worry”, Father Kevin replied. “Our students are now scattered all over this region and some of them are in influential positions. I know whom you are referring to and I know the direction and the path that group has taken. In fact, I gave the necessary directives to these so called ‘trekkers. By afternoon tomorrow, we will be able to nab them, probably near Gangtok or the border between India and China and hand them over to you. I think after you recover your deity, you may hand them over to the police officers, who I believe, are searching for them.”

“It is written in our scriptures, Mark, Chapter; 11, Verse;24, “What things so ever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye shall receive them, and ye shall have them.”

That evening after dinner Tiger and Father Kevin sat in the veranda outside the warden’s room staring at the stars in the clear cloudless sky above. “That’s the North Pole star”, said Tiger. “You taught us that. That’s the Great Bear or ‘Saptarshi’ and the small star glimmering beside one of the stars is known by the name ‘Arundhati’.”

“That’s good, you remember all that we taught you.”

“Father”, said Tiger. “Before joining the Jesuit order you were a student of Anthropology but in school you didn’t get an opportunity to teach us that interesting subject. Instead, you taught us Geography and Astronomy.”

Father Kevin smiled. “Yes, but I did do some research on the ethnic tribes of this region and I have published my findings in a book that is taught at the local university here.”

Tiger was listening to him with rapt attention. He had become a student once again in his alma mater.

“In prehistoric period, these were six human prototypes. Surprisingly the ancient Sumerian texts mention this. The Mayan texts speak of three human models.”

“These prototypes were scattered all over the globe at secluded sites and vast distances were a deterrent to their intermixing and interbreeding. It’s probable that ultimately the Homo sapiens survived, because they spread out of the African continent and killed their other lesser skilled cousins, the Homo habilis, the Homo erectus and the Neanderthals.”

“There was another cousin of ours, the Homo floresiensis. They were so named because their remains were discovered in the Indonesian island of the Flores in the Liang Bua cave, about twenty feet below the ground.”

“They were strange, in that, they were only three and a half feet tall. Like the little Pigmies. In the Altai Mountains in Siberia an unclassified finger bone fragment was also found. A species now known as Denisovans was identified from that single finger bone.”

“Wow!” said Tiger in amazement. “I wish I was a student of anthropology.”

Go off to sleep now my child”, said Father Kevin, “and let me do the homework corrections. Tomorrow is the last lap of your race. You have always been good at sports. Go and get your treasure back.”

Chapter 36:

Last Lap in the Race against Time



Mr. Choudhury was now nearing Gangtok. His assistant, PG was with him and so was inspector Peter, who had taken a bus that was heading towards Gangtok along the fiery river, had reached the police station prior to Mr. Choudhury.

“I’m Peter, inspector in C.I.D. of the Bengal Police”, he introduced himself to Mr. Choudhury, the moment he walked into the police station.

“We’ve received information that a young man, a tourist, disappeared halfway from a river rafting adventure trip. From the description given by the tour guide, we’re pretty sure that he was Tiger.

Do you have any idea as to where he could be?” asked Mr. Choudhury.

“It’ll be difficult to predict his exact coordinates. The half way point of the river rafting trip, where he is reported is to have gone missing, is about a kilometre from the nearest village where a residential missionary school is located. Tiger may have gone to that village and hired a vehicle to proceed towards Gangtok. We could send someone from the police station to the school to find out if he had gone there. But I believe that he may have already reached Gangtok. I’m actually on a personal visit to this area, but I was requested by the local SHO to meet you here. I’ll take your leave now.”

Peter left the police station and headed straight for his favourite hotel whose proprietor was a childhood friend. At

the doorway of the hotel his friend welcomed him with open arms.

“I’ve done my homework”, he said. “But let’s have breakfast first.”

Whispering softly he said, “Four people have checked into a hotel in North Gangtok. They look like Chinese citizens but they have submitted Indian Aadhar identity cards at the hotel counter. The address mentioned in their identity cards is China Town in Kolkata. They have also booked a SUV vehicle for visiting the Tsomgo lake, Hangulake, Baba Mandir and the Indo-Chinese border at Nathula, a much sought after tourist spot in Sikkim.”

Peter was listening to him with rapt attention.

“Could be them. Can I see the CCTV footage when they checked in?”

“I’ll arrange for that”, replied his friend, “Meanwhile, I’ve contacted my travel agents and guides in the 3rd Mile Police Check Post and also in the 1st Mile Check Post. They’ll stop the vehicle on some pretext or the other and detain them till you arrive there.”

On Mr.Choudhury’s request, a police team visited the missionary school and on cross questioning the resident students suspected that it could be Tiger who had spent that night in their hostel. Father Kevin admitted that his former student had come to visit him and had told him that he was going to Siliguri, a story they felt was untrue. They were quite sure that Tiger would take a less taken route through the forest to reach a small town from where he would probably take a public transport, possibly a taxi to Gangtok.

Taking their sniffer dogs, guns, ammunitions, and other equipments, they started on foot as the route through the hills was no longer motor able. The sniffer dogs had sniffed

the bed used by Tiger the previous night and were hungrily pulling the police personnel towards the forest and the roaring Teesta River. Tiger had left only about twenty minutes or probably half an hour ahead of them and his scent was strong and clear to the sniffer police dogs.

The river Teesta roared wildly its way through the narrow valley, swinging from side to side, jumping here and there playfully to form small occasional whirlpools that expanded and ebbed in its surrounding waters, frothing its way forward on a seemingly endless journey. Occasionally a large rock stood defiantly like a fearless sentinel as the rushing water split apart to dive sideways and then move on. The trees on the hills on the two sides of the river rhythmically swung from one side to the other as the wind whistled through its leaves. There in the distance, an angelic waterfall fell gracefully from an astounding height of a hundred metres to join the rushing Teesta River and merge with it noisily but imperceptibly.

Tiger stood there, legs slightly apart for balance, hands by his side, his survival equipment strapped on to his leather belt. He surveyed the river and the thick forest above looking for the possible paths to escape detection. His elder brother, an army lieutenant, trained as a Black Cat commando, had taught him all that a commando ought to know for camouflage, survival and living off the land. Essential survival skills, defining paths with or without GPS, with a simple map and an old compass, the use of primitive weapons and most importantly, fighting with his bare hands were his forte.

Battle ready, his muscular athletic form dived into the swirling waters like a trained dolphin and disappeared in its multitudinous waves. The timing was critical for the police party was not far behind. He had heard the bark of a police dog about three hundred metres behind him and its echo

through the surrounding hills. Analysing its coordinates and the tough rocky path behind him, he had realised that it would be less than ten minutes before they would reach his spot of rest and nab him. He had no option but to jump into the dangerous waters.

The search party was hurriedly climbing down the rocks, cutting down the obstructing foliage, with the sniffer dogs leading the way, salivating and panting, their restless eyes scanning all around them. But by the time they reached ‘the spot’, Tiger had crossed almost half the river diagonally. The ferocity of the river had carried him three fourths of a kilometre downstream and now it was almost impossible for them to see him with the naked eyes. The sub inspector leading the search party fished out his binoculars and scanned the river downstream. He estimated the diagonal distance and the movement downstream that Tiger could have taken and searched hungrily as the dogs pulled at their harnesses and barked loudly. After a minute, he felt he saw a human head bobbing up and down in the wild waveform waters.

“There he is”, he screamed. “There he is, crossing the river, about fifty meters from the other bank of the river.” He handed over his binoculars to his Deputy who searched for the fugitive figure, but then he could no longer be seen.

Tiger knew that if he continued to swim to the other shore, he would definitely be detected by the search party. He knew the river well as he had rafted in those waters earlier and was sure that there were no more boulders or rocks ahead. He dived below the waves and allowed Teesta to take him in her arms and further ahead into oblivion and safety.

The sub- inspector radioed his station and requested for back up support on the other bank about a kilometre ahead from the location of the search party and specifically asked them to

bring a sniffer dog, guns and ammunition along with them. He knew that Tiger was armed and dangerous.

He then stepped back and opened the backpack of his Deputy and fished out a small sized box.

“What’s this?” asked one of the newly deployed sepoys.

“It’s a drone. We’ve recently acquired this in our police station for surveillance activity. We’re using it for the first time. I’m sure it’ll be of great help.”

He took out the machine and started setting it up, referring occasionally to the user manual. His Deputy took out a small laptop and started the synchronisation process after linking it with the drone. The sub inspector looked at him and smiled, but didn’t say a word. That drone didn’t need to be synchronised with a laptop. It had a GPS locator connected to a satellite, a large memory, a digital screen, two joy sticks for manoeuvring it laterally and to a height of five hundred metres and a distance of four kilometres, a recording microphone and three battery backups. Within a minute the drone was airborne and a hawk was searching for Tiger who had disappeared amidst the Teesta waves.

Chapter 37: Near the Finishing Line



Despite an intensive search using the airborne drone, Tiger could not be located. Once on the ground, Tiger had climbed up quickly holding the rocks and using them as step holds and was lucky to get a lift in a truck heading for Gangtok from the road on the other side of the river using his police ID. Tired and thoroughly exhausted to the bone, he lay down in the make shift bed just behind the driver's seat. At around 1: 00 pm in the afternoon, he got up and requested the driver to give him his mobile phone. He dialled Peter and informed him of his whereabouts. Peter told him to lie low and get down at a nondescript tea shop at about a hundred metres from a landmark before entering Gangtok as the police were eagerly waiting there to pounce upon him. He also informed him that he had located a Chinese group that sought permission from the Deputy Commissioner's office to visit the Indo-Chinese border as tourists using dubious Aadhar ID cards. They were the gang he was frantically searching for right from the national capital, New Delhi.

"Wait for me brother", said Tiger, "I'm coming".

Mr. Choudhury was going through the printouts of the hotel reservation lists in Gangtok police station when he received a call on his mobile.

"Sir, it's me, Rakshit", said a voice from the other end.

"Where are you?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

“I’m on my way to Gangtok”, said Rakshit. “I’ve received information from the local police station that Tiger disappeared en route and is probably heading towards Gangtok. It seems that the last scene of this endless drama may be enacted there.”

Mr. Choudhury asked him to come straight to the police station where he was waiting.

Tiger got down from the truck at the earmarked tea shop and paid a hundred rupees to the truck driver, which he initially refused and then accepted, thanking him for his help and support. The tea shop owner welcomed him and immediately took him to his bedroom in an adjoining house and asked him to not to venture outside.

“Make yourself comfortable”, said the tea shop owner, “I’ll get something for you to eat. We only have Wai Wai noodles as of now. Would you like to have some?”

Tiger nodded indicating that he was famished. He opened his soggy socks and his half-dried shirt and his banyan. In a few minutes he was served a double omelette and a bowl of hot steaming noodles.

“At 7:00 pm someone will come to pick you up. Till that time take rest and under no circumstance should you venture out”, said the tea shop owner as he went back to his shop.

A little while later a bus crossed the tea shop. Rakshit was in that bus, oblivious of the fact that the elusive Tiger he was seeking was resting in a room adjacent to that very shop. At 7:00 pm sharp, a vehicle pulled up at the tea shop. Petergot down from the vehicle holding with a small jute bag.

“I’ve to pick up a police officer from here”, he said.

He was taken straight into the bedroom of the shop owner behind the tea shop where Tiger was resting.

“Put these clothes on”, he told Tiger as he fished out a much-used police uniform of his size from his bag. He then sat down and fished out a piece of paper on which he had written down his ‘To Do List’ of activities,

“We’ve got to leave immediately”, he said.

Tiger dressed up quickly and the duo left the shop in a hurry.

The next morning at 7:00 am, Zhang and his team members, Hong Tao, Mei and Lin received passes for visiting Nathula from the tourism department authorised by the Deputy Commissioner of the district. A Tata Sumo vehicle pulled up at the hotel doorway. Hong Tao paid five thousand rupees in cash to the driver as advance and the group boarded the vehicle with their back packs. All were dressed as tourists with collarless T shirts, Nepali caps and blue faded denims. About a hundred metres away in a large seven seated vehicle with four wheel drive car with a private registration number, Tiger was observing them silently using his small Russian binoculars.

“Yes, it’s them”, he said with his face impassive and attentive.

As the Tata Sumo vehicle started for its four-hour journey to Nathula, the other vehicle followed in close pursuit maintaining a distance of about a hundred metres. The road wound around the hill sides. There was no escape for anyone now as the narrow road had no off shoots. Where could anyone escape? Gradually as the asphalt slipped behind the wheels the mighty mountains appeared with snowcapped tops and the atmospheric temperature began to drop rapidly. The passengers of both the vehicles pulled up their window panes. Greenery was giving way to rocky mountains without any vegetation. Tiger was sitting on the back seat of the vehicle wearing the police uniform. Soon they were close to the Third mile check post. A motorcyclist suddenly came up from

behind his vehicle, speeded up, zipping past him and stopped right in front of the vehicle, a little distance ahead.

Tiger got down and sat in the pillion seat of the motorbike.

“I need to cross the check post incognito”, he said to the driver of his vehicle. “Pick me up again after crossing the check post. Remember, none of you know my real antecedents. At the check post if any officer asks you as to why you are travelling alone, tell him, you’re going to pick up a tourist whose car has broken down.”

He sped away following the Tata Sumo carrying the gang which was heading towards the police check post. The Tata Sumo vehicle finally reached the check post and the Chinese ‘tourists’ were asked to step down and meet the officer concerned. They were feeling uneasy with concern writ large on their faces. They signalled to each other to relax and walked at a leisurely pace into the check post building where they were confronted by a burly officer.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to stay here till our officers come from Gangtok to interview you.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Zhang in English. “We’re tourists. You are making some kind of mistake. We didn’t do anything. Have a look at our Aadhar ID cards and the tourist permission issued by the Deputy Commissioner.”

“I’m sorry, we’ve specific information to stop four tourists”, replied the officer, lifting up his hands to indicate the word ‘tourists’ in inverted commas. “Please go and sit in that adjoining room.”

He pointed to a room on the right. The four entered the room which was sparsely furnished with only five plastic chairs. The officer locked the door from the outside.

“You’re making some kind of mistake”, said Zhang. “Please go through our documents.”

The officer didn’t care to reply. He walked away to the adjoining room.

The motorcycle on which Tiger was a pillion rider, pulled up at the check post a little while later. Tiger got down, took off his Aviator Ray Ban goggles and entered the check post. He met the officer sitting on a small narrow desk on the front veranda.

“I’ve come from the Gangtok police station”, he said. We received information from a hotel that the four Chinese fugitives were heading towards Nathula. Have you been able to apprehend them?”

“Yes”, replied the officer. “They’re inside in that adjoining room.”

“Well”, I need to interrogate them before I take them back to Gangtok”, said Tiger as he flashed his fake police ID card. The officer didn’t care much to verify the ID. He opened the door to let Tiger in and then closed the door behind him.

“It’s you!” yelled an alarmed Mei.

“Yes”, said Tiger. “I’m an officer of the Delhi Police Department and I’ve been trailing you and your accomplices all this time. Now, prepare to go to jail.an Indian jail.”

“We haven’t done anything”, said Zhang pleadingly.

“Return that stolen Buddha idol and I promise to help you all to cross over to China and to freedom.”

“We haven’t stolen anything. You don’t have any proof.”

Tiger noticed that Hong Tao had a small black leather bag slung from his right shoulder. It was similar to a bag he himself had purchased in a shop adjoining the tea shop in

Gangtok. Without caring to check the large backpacks, he pulled at the leather bag and as expected there was something heavy in it. Without wasting a moment, he opened it and soon the lost treasure was in his hands- the object of his adoration- the holy Buddha made of Onyx.

Hong Tao pounced upon him, snatched the idol and the black bag, opened the door and rushed out of the room. The officer, who was sitting at the main doorway, stopped him instantly and a scuffle ensued. Soon other policemen pinned all the four 'tourists' down and handcuffed them. Tiger picked up the black bag and put the idol of Buddha inside it and hung it on his shoulder.

"This is their loot, but it's my object of adoration and worship," he said to himself.

The vehicle carrying Peter had arrived at the spot by this time. He introduced himself and said that he had come to take the four Chinese thieves to Gangtok to meet Mr. Choudhury, a senior officer who had come all the way from New Delhi.

They were all forced to board the vehicle by Tiger and two other police officers and soon they were on the way back to Gangtok with the stolen Buddha. The four convicts had been squeezed into the rear seats of the Toyota vehicle with their hands handcuffed behind them and the doors locked up. Peter sat on the second row of seats with another person, apparently a local of that area and Tiger. The motorcyclist who had brought Tiger to the police check post quietly followed their vehicle. As they drove back the winding road, all remained silent for a while. Then Zhang initiated a conversation after a long hiatus.

"We have our contacts both in Gangtok and with our own army deployed at the border. Just let us off. I'll arrange to pay you very handsomely on your return to Gangtok" he said.

“Who’s going to guarantee that payment once we let you off?” asked Peter as he winked at Tiger.

“Give me your phone. I’ll connect you to our contact there. He’ll transfer that amount to a bank account of your choice. I assure you of that”, he said.

“You mean the one who first contacted you in New Delhi?” asked Tiger.

“Yes.”, replied Zhang.

“Ok. Connect us to him”, said Peter as he fished out his mobile from his pocket and asked for the number. Peter dialled a number that was verbally communicated to him by Zhang. The phone rang for a while but no one picked it up from the other end.

“He’s not picking up the phone”, said Peter. “Maybe because it’s an unknown mobile number for him.”

“Please dial the number once again”, pleaded Hong Tao. Peter dialled once again. This time someone picked up the phone.

“Yes?” said a voice from the other end.

“Who’s speaking?” asked Peter.

“Dr. Chan.”

“Well Dr. Chan. We have a few hostages, probably your friends. Talk to the team leader.”

He placed the mobile on the cheek of Chan who edged himself closer.

“We’ve been arrested by a police officer. He says he will let us off if we pay him handsomely. Arrange to get us off the hook immediately. Transfer the amount he asks for to an account number given by him.”

“Ok. Hand over the phone to him”, replied the visibly disturbed dentist in a quiet tone.

Chan asked Peter to talk.

Just then another vehicle crossed them from the other side. It was a police vehicle. It screeched to a halt immediately on the left side of the narrow road after crossing them.

Tiger had seen Rakshit sitting beside the driver and Mr.. Choudhury behind him in the second row of seats of the vehicle. Tiger shouted, “Don’t stop the car! It’s them, the police. Drive as fast as you can.”

Inside Chan looked up at Peter and Tiger, questioningly. Their car had picked up speed after crossing that police vehicle, slowing down only at the sharp hair-pin bends.

The police vehicle tried to restart but it took a while to do so. Then they had to turn their vehicle in that narrow patch of road which took another twominutes.Mr. Choudhury hadn’t noticed Tiger, but he had clearly seen Peter. In a flash the whole scenario became crystal clear to him. Peter obviously was not on a personal pleasure trip. What the hell was he doing in a vehicle full of young men with mongoloid features? Why was he returning to Gangtok without keeping him in the loop?”

“Follow that vehicle!!” he yelled.“Those bastards are in that vehicle!”

Chapter 38:

With a View to a Kill



The narrow road wound round the curved sides of the mountains covered occasionally with snow at the tops. Here and there, were meshes that had been pinned on to the slopes to keep the loose rocks and boulders in their position. Landslides are common phenomena in this region, particularly after the rains. The duty of the BRO or Border Roads Organisation is to keep the roads open at all costs, all the time, throughout the year. Using heavy earth moving machines they keep clearing the dislodged debris from the road to keep them 'war ready' for the military vehicles to ply at any hour of the day or night.

One such heavy earth moving vehicle was now blocking the road. It was removing a large sized rock that had suddenly tumbled down the mountainside on to the road, about ten minutes after Mr. Choudhury's vehicle had crossed that stretch of the road.

The Toyota Innova car had no option but to come to a standstill. There was another tourist vehicle ahead of them. Peter panicked. He told Tiger that Mr. Choudhury had possibly seen him and his vehicle was following their vehicle and could arrive within minutes.

He got down from the car and shouted at the driver of the heavy earth moving monster of a vehicle gesticulating wildly. "Quickly move your vehicle. We're the police. We are on an urgent mission to catch fleeing terrorists. Move! Move! Move!"

Time was running out. Tiger knew he'd be arrested for stealing Rakshit's revolver and deserting the investigating team in Kolkata and striking out on his own. He took his black bag and jumped out of the car. Handing over a black bag to Peter he started descending the mountain slope towards a river. About a hundred metres ahead of him was a waterfall. He began edging towards that waterfall diagonally, jumping from one rock to another holding on to foliage that had sprouted in between splitting the rocks.

Peter slung his black bag on his shoulder and rushed past the earth moving vehicle and the rock to the other side and began to run as fast as he could. Chan and his team were now restless. With their hands tied to their backs, there was little they could do in that confined space. They somehow pushed ahead the side seat and squeezed past the narrow space and opened the rear door and got out of the vehicle. They began to follow Peter as he had their black bag and within it, their stolen booty. That bag with the idol of Buddha inside it was their only passport to crossover to China and to freedom.

Peter was now almost a hundred metres ahead, down under, when Mr. Choudhury's vehicle stopped at the bottleneck on the road, with the earth mover ahead. With revolvers in their hands, Mr. Choudhury and P.G. got down from their vehicle along with Rakshit and were running wildly towards the four convicts and Peter. It was at that moment when P.G. noticed Tiger rushing down the mountain slope.

"Sir", he said, "You go and follow Tiger and let me and Rakshit handle this group."

"Where is Tiger?" asked Mr. Choudhury.

"He is rushing down the slope towards the waterfall. There he is", said P.G. pointing to a distant figure rushing down effortlessly like a young mountain goat. 'Polly Gatto' was heavily built but was surprisingly swift. He didn't dare to

shoot anyone as there were quite a few tourist cars on the road. Rakshit of course didn't have his gun with him. Mr. Choudhury on the other hand was now in quick pursuit of Tiger as he descended the slope.

"Stop Tiger." he yelled. "Stop."

Tiger was obviously not looking back. He was trained by his brother to run like a war ready commando. To calculate the distance of his enemies by the intensity and location of their voices and sounds. He was now dangerously close to the waterfall, almost on the very edge of a ledge of rock that jutted out into the waterfall.

"Stop or I'll have to shoot you," shouted Mr. Choudhury as he now stood still holding his revolver firmly with both his hands.

For the first time, Tiger stood still and looked back. Time as if stood still. Their eyes met. In a brief second the entire drama of the last few days flashed across his eyes like a movie in an instant.

A loud gunshot split the air. The quiet mountainside reverberated with the bang as it echoed through the hills. Tiger slowly fell into the waterfall and disappeared in its frothy wild waters into the downstream below.

Visibly shaken for a moment for his "faux pas", Mr. Choudhury was now climbing down and diagonally moving closer to the ledge where Tiger was standing. What had made him shoot Tiger? Panting and sweating in that cold wintry morning he stood there, scanning the waters for any sign of Tiger who had now disappeared into oblivion.

Mr. Choudhury regretted his decision. He had never been impulsive before. Never. He pulled out his mobile and conveyed the developments to the Gangtok police station. He asked them to search for Tiger downstream. Putting the

mobile back in his breast pocket he slowly and laboriously began to climb up to the road ahead, alone and panting.

By the time he reached the road, he was totally exhausted and he sat down on a milestone sweating profusely. He looked at the direction in which the Chinese thieves and Peter had gone. Despite all the preceding tragic events his lips curled up to a smile when he saw Rakshit and P.G. and a few locals holding the four Chinese thieves and bringing them towards him. As they came nearer, he asked, "Where's Peter, the other guy?"

"We couldn't catch him", replied Rakshit. "But we managed to catch these thieves and get the bag with the stolen idol and my officialservice revolver which someone, probably Tiger, had thrown on the road. He handed over the black bag to Mr. Choudhury.

Mr. Choudhury lost no time in opening the bag and examining its content. There in the sunlight he joyously felt a cold smooth idol of Buddha.

"What a chase", he said, "for this little priceless idol."

The heavy earth moving vehicle had cleared the road and moved aside. The long lines of vehicles were now slowly moving in both directions, turn by turn. Mr. Choudhury boarded the police vehicle and asked P.G. and Rakshit to squeeze the four handcuffed Chinese into the rear seat of the Innova car and travel by that vehicle, keeping a strict vigil on them till they reached the Gangtok police station. Both the vehicles, with the Toyota Innova car ahead of the police vehicle, carrying Mr. Choudhury, slowly edged past the tourist vehicles and moved at a modest speed towards their final destination, the Gangtok police station.

Chapter 39: Homeward Bound



Arrangements had been made by the Delhi police for Mr. Choudhury to fly from Bagdogra airport near Siliguri to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata, and catch the connecting flight from there to New Delhi along with P.G. and the four convicts. A police vehicle awaited them right inside the I.G.I Airport, New Delhi near the runway, where the airline halted. The police officers saluted Mr. Choudhury and took the convicts straight to Tihar jail. P.G. and Mr. Choudhury left the airport through the arrival gate and boarded their official vehicle parked at the exit point. They went straight to the Tihar jail behind the vehicle carrying the convicts.

A WEEK LATER.....

The long, endless and tortuous chase spanning several states had finally come to an end and the stolen Buddha was finally resting in its original designated location in the museum, where tighter security arrangements had been put in place. Mr. Choudhury was congratulated by his department for recovering the priceless idol and apprehending the members of the international gang of antique thieves. The Chinese ambassador to India also met Mr. Choudhury in his embassy office to be debriefed on the whole episode and the departmental action taken.

Back in Sikkim in that distant village nestling in the hills, the gracefully aged grandfather of Tiger sat in his parlour watching a special T.V. report on the recovery of the stolen

Buddha, surrounded by a dozen villagers including his neighbours. The report ended with a screenshot of the recovered idol in the museum. It looked exactly like its old revered self. Everyone in the parlour split into a loud laughter as they looked to their right side. There on a single firm sofa sat Tiger watching the report with a smile on his face. On the wall exactly in front of him was their small altar fixed securely to the wall. There, sitting in the worship alter was the original object of their collective adoration - the real stolen Buddha made of Onyx years ago.

“How did that idol reach Delhi?” asked a villager to Tiger. “It looks exactly like our original Buddha. I’m intrigued.”

“Like a magician who changes the cards before you even notice the sleight of his hand. I kept the original idol in my black bag and put the duplicate similar looking idol in Hong Tao’s black bag before handing it over to Peter in the police check post.”

Just then Peter entered the parlour from the dining space.

“I threw the bag Tiger had given me on the side of the road while I was running. It tumbled down the hill for a distance. A policeman ran down the hillside to collect it. That gave me the much needed time to make good my escape”, he said.

“But Peter, why did you start bargaining with them regarding helping them escape in lieu of money?” asked one of the villagers.

“I wanted to pick up the threads. I wanted to know who were assisting them in crossing over to China. There was no question of helping them escape in return for the money. In fact, later, I phoned the Gangtok police station house officer and helped him nab the dentist and a few local businessmen who were assisting them to cross over to China.”

Tiger glanced at his grandpa who now leaned back on his wooden armchair with a faraway look in his eyes.

He spoke slowly.....

“On the occasion of Drukpa Tshechi, the day of Lord Buddha’s first sermon to his disciples in Sarnath after attaining enlightenment, the master had said, as is mentioned in our sacred text Dhammapada, Volume 2, that,“All that we are is a result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts; it is made up of our thoughts. He who speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him as a shadow that never leaves him.”

He continued slowly, “I knew my Tiger would bring back our Buddha. He has pure thoughts. He has an element of our Buddha in him.”

Tiger looked at his aged grandfather who closed his eyes and put both his hands together on the front of his chest and went into a state of deep sleep. He knew that his sacred job, his promise to his loving grandfather had been fulfilled in a miraculous way.

It was time for him to rest too.

THE END