

PRIME TIME CRIME

"Compelling, sensational and unstoppable... A must read!"

- Kajol, Actor.



VRUSHALI TELANG

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1st Edition Published in India by Vishwakarma Publications in April 2018
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ISBN - 978-93-86455-52-9

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Published by:

Vishwakarma Publications

34A/1, Suyog Center, 7th Floor, Gultekadi Marketyard Road,
Giridhar Bhavan Chowk, Pune: 411037, Maharashtra, India.

Email: info@vpindia.co.in

Website: www.vishwakarmapublications.com

Cover: The Book Bakers

Typeset and Layout: Chaitali Nachnekar

Printed at: Repro India Ltd., Mumbai

₹ 250/-

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Acknowledgments

*Main akela hi chala tha
Jaanib-e-maanzil magar,
Log saath aatey gaye
Aur kaarwaan banta gaya.*

– Majrooh Sultanpuri

Thank-you Kajol for being generous with your compliments. Coming from an actor of your caliber and moreover an avid reader, this means a lot. It is an honour and privilege to have your testimonial.

Nonita Kalra, thank you so much for being the first reader. And for tweeting about the manuscript long before it got published. Your faith in Prime Time Crime kept me in good stead.

A friend in need is a friend indeed. Ryan Stephen thank you for facilitating and making sure my unpublished manuscript was in the right hands.

Every manuscript needs a publishing house for it to reach readers. Vishal Soni of Vishwakarma, thank you for your faith in my work. Literary Agent Suhail Mathur of The Book Bakers for giving the novel an apt title, getting it a publisher – you are an author's dream come true champ!

When I decided to write the novel in January of 2014– there was just one thing I knew. And that was, that I knew nothing about the world I had set out to create. I wanted to write about the symbiosis between a reporter and her subject. Earlier in my career I was an entertainment correspondent for about 4 years, but the ecosphere of crime reporting was alien to me.

So I buckled down to reading and speaking to those who knew. To begin with, it was not easy getting leads or appointments. But as I plodded on, many generous souls came forward to help. In a city that moves at a

break neck speed, professionals took time out to share knowledge, insight and leads. And to them I am grateful forever.

City Historian Deepak Rao- you are one of the pillars of this novel. I wouldn't have been able to write this novel had we not met.

Dr.Sanjay Singh for reading through all my drafts and literally holding my hand through the process of writing my first noir. I can never thank you enough for everything that you have done for me.

Miloni Bhatt – for those early rudimentary drafts and patiently answering each question without ever dissing it.

Debashish Panigrahi- I remember the long phone conversations in which you cleared my all my doubts as you were too busy to meet.

A big shout to my professors at SCM (Social Communication Media, Sophia Polytechnic): Smruti Koppikar and Jerry Pinto for introducing me to the world of journalism. Also many thanks for all the leads.

IPS (Retd) DG Maharashtra, K.P Raghuvanshi for your time and consideration. You were one of the first people I spoke to.

ACP Shirish Inamdaar (Retd) for your valuable feedback and for being a power-house of knowledge. Your words “focus on verity rather than entertainment,” continue to ring through.

There are officers in-service who do not wish to be named. Your contribution to this novel is immense. Moreover thank you for reading the initial drafts and pointing errors large and small.

Thank you : Rajendra Aklekar, Dharmesh Thakker, Mateen Hafiz, Bakul Sharma and veteran photographer Mahen Singh, Sharib Hashmi, Sanjay Rokade, Chuman Das, Varkha Chulani, Saleel Narvekar, Capt. Rajat Shrivastav and Kalyan Samant, Preeti Vyas, Sheila Kanungo, (Late) Madhavi Karandikar, Raghuraj Deshpande and Saveena Sachar – thank you all for your insights

Book-video team – Arpan Bahl, John Wilmore, Yusuf Khan, Ninad Kamat and Sucharita Tyagi. Congratulations on a fabulous job

There are officers in-service who do not wish to be named. Your inputs were immense. Thank you for reading the initial drafts and pointing errors large and small.

To my family and friends for your rock solid support.

Many pranaams, salaams and heartfelt gratitude to each one of you mentioned as well as those not mentioned in this list. You have been a part of a very special journey.



May 1999,
Peon Chawl
Lower Parel, Mumbai

“Breaking News! Notorious gangster Mohan Raswe from Navi Mumbai was admitted to a nursing home after he complained of chest pains...”

A.T stopped slicing the red bell peppers he had picked from Foodland earlier that afternoon. Placing the knife gently on the dry side of the chopping board he lifted the napkin and walked to the TV monitor.

Adjacent to the reporter unfolding details of the news-story, in spilt screen, were images of the ill-famed Mohan Raswe as he was taken on a stretcher by two ward boys. Following suit, a lady kept pace with the carriers. A heavy set teenage girl limply held the end of the *dupatta* to her mouth, in a weak attempt to mask her face from the media flashbulbs. They were Raswe’s family.

Just then A. T’s Motorola beeped. The message read, **Bal Mohan Vidya Mandir is a good school. It is next to Shivaji Park in Dadar.**

Accustomed to reading cryptic texts, A.T read, over and over again till the message made sense:

Bal **Mohan** Vidya Mandir **is** a good school. It is **next** to Shivaji Park.

Mohan - Is - Next

It had been a week since A.T had orchestrated the single shot death of MLA, Lalit Apte. Aimed straight down at 180 degrees, A.T had shot him from the corridor of the third floor of Apte's apartment building. Apte's crown exploded, and his brain popped out of the skull as he collapsed to the floor. A.T then escaped by rappelling down the balcony of an occupied flat!

The flat owner and the cops were clueless, other politicians were scared despite adding to their security and the media had a field day reporting the flurry. A.T had made a clean kill leaving no trace.

Though he had used a pistol, a Mauser to be precise, A.T was a highly trained rifle shooter. He worked at the behest of Babban Mistry, the right hand of absconding mafia don, Khalif Ahmed. Babban Mistry ran Khalif's nefarious business for him in Mumbai. The Khalif Gang had started with pick-pocketing in the by-lanes of Mahim in late 1960s. At the turn of the century now, it had spread its tentacles in various parts of the globe. It was an organized crime syndicate and on the radar of the Interpol.

A.T was Khalif and Mistry's best kept secret. No one in the gang knew about this tall, lanky young man with a clean-shaven face and neat crew cut. From the way he spoke, walked and conducted his affairs, A.T could pass off as a cadet in the armed forces.

He had never met nor had he spoken to Khalif. He simply got orders from Babban Mistry and executed accordingly.

On an average, A.T 'worked' 3 to 4 times a year. It depended on the nature of the job. The death of Lalit Apte had taken three months to execute, from the day he got his assignment to the day he finished Apte off. It comprised exploration, research, co-ordination, waiting for the right opportunity and the audacious execution. Some jobs took longer than that while some were a matter of weeks. If luck and intuition were by his side – the target met his death within 24 hours.

A.T mostly worked out of the country. His victims were high profile foreign nationals: a cabinet minister in France who dealt with Arab diamond merchants on the sly; a casino Baron from Vegas who was with his mistress in Portugal; a Serbian drug trafficker on the run in Naples; a chartered accountant of the deadly Triads of Hong Kong and a Spanish media magnate who doubled up as a cocaine supplier in Madrid.

Scouting unfamiliar territory; stalking the target; the thrill of being in an unknown land; a job done without leaving a trace; purchasing condiments of Mediterranean Cuisine like Thyme and Rosemary that were not easily available in Mumbai in 1999 - the hunter loved everything about his hunt.

But now, 2 back-to-back contracts in a span of a week, that too on home-ground was unheard of. However, A.T had never been the one to ask questions. He ran the tips of his fingers gently down his chiseled face and started to think of how he was going to put a bullet through Mohan Raswe's head.

Mohan Raswe had been Khalif Ahmed's Man Friday till the gang lord escaped to Bangkok sometime in the mid-1980s. After that Mohan behaved like the Don and refused to acknowledge Khalif's superiority. But unlike the enterprising Khalif – Mohan did not have it in him to usurp all his illegal businesses. Nor did he have the tact to manage the wide-spread Khalif gang in Mumbai. Soon Babban Mistry was promoted as Khalif's CEO in Mumbai while Raswe became the enemy.

Still, Mohan Raswe managed to sink his teeth into a small part of Khalif's business - Extortion. It was small for Khalif, but large enough for Raswe. He began to extort from builders and local restaurateurs of New Bombay now known as Navi Mumbai.

With the extension of the Harbour Railway line into Navi Mumbai in 1990, many builders shifted their focus on developing residential colonies in far flung places. Areas of Sanpada, Kharghar, Kalamboli, Ulve and Ghansoli which were hitherto unknown saw an upsurge of housing development. Navi Mumbai was the next big goldmine for the builder community. And they were all preyed upon by Raswe.

In one of the 'extortion meetings', in full view of his staff, the gangster jabbed a carving knife into builder baron, Yogesh Mansukhani. As Mansukhani bled to death he looked at his staff for help. But they were as scared and powerless as he was. The builder lobby was left speechless. After all, Raswe was nothing but a street hooligan and he had the nerve to bleed one of 'them'! The Builders wanted his blood.

In 1999, Mumbai Underworld was made up of a trinity of 3 gangs. Khalif Ahmed, Mohan Raswe and Usman Ali.

Though Mohan Raswe was the smallest fish in the pond he was the only one who could unite warring gang lords, Khalif Ahmed and Usman Ali. He was despised by them both.

He had betrayed Khalif. And over the last few years, Raswe's boys plundered vehicles that carried Usman Ali's contraband of cocaine and arms from the rocky parts of the Konkan Coast to the city.

Khalif-Usman gang wars were discussed with the fervor of a cricket match. From press club, police stations, Irani Cafes, local bars, dance bars, carom clubs, gambling dens, and smoking joints as well as the *panwallah's* nook- everyone had their two bits to share on the Khalif-Usman rivalry.

Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Taiwan and sometimes mainland China – Khalif's exact location was hard to trace. He was reportedly living in Tehran for a bit and off late, in Islamabad. Khalif was a suave businessman. Indian Intelligence had dossiers of his collaborations with the Triads of Hong Kong, the Japanese Yakuza and the German faction of the Vozdovac Serbian Mafia. With a finger in every nefarious business and collaborations with international mafia Mumbai *cha* Khalif was growing larger than life as the years passed by.

While Khalif Ahmed had managed to gain control over the other petty gangs of Mumbai, his rival Usman Ali proved to be a rough nut. Guttural and ruthless, Usman Ali operated from the shores of Mahim. On the face of it, he ran a timber mart. He too had interests in the usual business of the mafia: importing arms, extortion, contract killing, illicit liquor, gambling dens and flesh trade. However, he was the biggest importer of cocaine and largest producer of counterfeit notes in the country.

In Mumbai the two gangs were constantly at loggerheads.

With weekly tussles that made headlines, it was a given that one gang was going to be wiped out by the other. They had nothing in common except hatred, rivalry and one common enemy. Mohan Raswe. They wanted him dead.

On their part, the Mumbai Police could not get a hold of Mohan Raswe either. For he was a chameleon who often changed the way he looked.

Once Raswe was arrested outside the famous Deepa Dance Bar by the scrupulous ACP Pathak and his junior, the dubious Inspector Kaloti.

Despite an inhuman 3rd degree torture, 2 days later, Mohan managed to escape from police custody. His man had palmed off a thick wad of U.S dollars to Kaloti. Raswe had been on the run since then and yet managed to extort large sums of hard cash from builders. His modus operandi was unknown.

Amongst underworld, police and journalists there were many folklores about Raswe. Some said he did Black Magic in a village called Lanja situated along the Konkan belt. The others gossiped about his fetish for transvestites in dance bars. And there were rumours that he was a chain smoker who consumed 12 packets of *chotta* Goldflake every day. Now, a heart attack at 42 had confirmed the addiction to nicotine.

“From Aarogya Nursing Home in Navi Mumbai, this is Bhaskar Menon City News.”

As A.T stared at the TV set, he collated information: Aarogya Nursing Home was made on Mohan Raswe’s turf. It was situated in the shanty where he made spurious liquor and re-filled it in imported single malt bottles. And now that his whereabouts had been reported, there would be heavy security incarcerating Raswe.

That night A.T buckled down to making a fake identity card for himself. And the next day when he looked at his avatar in the mirror he was pleased with what he saw.

He had successfully managed to transform his sharp personality into an unremarkable everyday man. Specs, thin moustache, full sleeve checked shirt, ill-fitting trousers with run down sandals had done the job. In his tattered leather satchel, he slipped the fake identity card of a medical representative of Star Pharmaceuticals.

On his way he stopped at the chemist and picked strips of medicines that were manufactured by Star Pharmaceuticals.

It took A.T two hours to reach Aarogya Nursing Home which was a shoddy ground plus one rectangular block of concrete. The nursing home was separated from Bharat Nagar Slums by a single street.

News media, police personnel and Raswe’s men waited endlessly on this street. Hanging his head low, A.T walked towards the entrance. He was stopped in his tracks by one of Raswe’s men. A.T pulled out his identity card and strips of medicines. Still staring at A.T, Raswe’s crony called out to one of the constables on duty. The constable checked the card

and nodded, attesting its authenticity. Despite that A.T was not allowed to enter. Raswe's crony told him no visitors were allowed till 'Dada' was discharged from the hospital. A.T nodded and left the scene. A.T's idea of scouting the target disguised as a medical representative had failed.

So, he decided to look around. As he walked away A.T noticed that the nursing home was at the farthest end of the shanty. There was a railway track that ran alongside the pokey hospital. A.T walked to the track. On the other side of the track was Saxena Heights, a housing complex under construction.

When A.T reached the first floor of the deserted under-construction housing complex, he noticed that he was at a level higher than the first floor of Aarogya Nursing Home. Looking at the railway tracks he made quick mathematical notes. The distance from where he was standing to the compound wall was less than half a meter; compound wall of Saxena Heights and the first track was around 30 meters; between two pairs of tracks it was around 1.8 meters; there were 4 such tracks; each set separated by 4.5 meters. Assuming the distance between the last rail line and Aarogya Nursing home was 30 meters as well – A.T was quick to calculate that he was standing anywhere between 70-75 meters from Aarogya Nursing Home. *"I will use a Remington 700 rifle along with 223 Remington cartridges, so that the bullet can go over a distance of 200 meters. But this one is going to be tough."*

The distance was not such a big deal. His biggest obstruction were the overhead wires that provided electricity to trains. A bullet-hit on any wire would cause a short circuit. With 4 rail tracks there were 8 such wires equidistant from one another. That, was his biggest challenge. Just then a train chugged past. A.T studied the pantograph above the train which drew electricity from the wires. It was impossible to shoot Raswe from the level he was at when a train passed by.

A.T then stared at the rectangular structure of the shoddy nursing home. He wanted to know where the toilet of the nursing home was. He was working on two simple assumptions. A nursing home in a shanty would have a singular common toilet for patients and staff. Second, a heart attack in early 40s could have been caused by an addiction to nicotine. And it is not easy to give up any addiction.

If Raswe was a chain smoker, he would have an urge to smoke, A.T thought. He doubted if Raswe had the willpower to stop despite the

angina attack. His family and doctors and his people would not allow him to smoke, reasoned A.T. The toilet was the only place he could surrender to his addiction in peace.

And as he kept an eye on the structure, he realized he'd have to perhaps go on the second floor to get a better view. He doubled up the cemented stairs to take a look. It was way higher and shooting from here would be cumbersome.

Now that meant A.T would have to elevate his sight on the first floor itself. He looked around and decided to leave. He'd have to speak to Babban Mistry about packing one side of the place with heavy bags of cement to increase height and give him space to lie down, perch his binoculars and keep his personal belongings.

When A.T came back two days later – the elevated bedding of cement bags was set out. How he loved working with Mistry! All he had to do was ask. He was given everything he wanted. From Babban Mistry, A.T also got to know that work had halted for six months now as Mohan Raswe and his people had made extortion calls to builder Virendra Saxena. The builder baron had sought protection from Khalif. He was their man.

One by one A.T opened up his paraphernalia: *methi laddoos* and water to sustain himself during the endless wait, Sungor ultra high magnification binoculars and a tripod. A packet of *chotta* Goldflake. He also carried a small notebook and a pencil. The idea was to take notes.

He scribbled. Track 1, track 2, Track 3, track 4. The idea was to find out the exact time at which the trains crossed the said spot; the interval time before the next train came along; time taken to smoke a *chotta* Goldflake at leisure; or three puffs of smoke hastily. And most importantly where the toilet was and at what time did the rectangular glass windows flashed open.

Time and trains passed by. A.T took copious notes. After 3 hours suddenly, someone opened a window. The cleaner swiftly threw water and mopped what seemed like an Indian toilet for he pulled the long iron flush. Then he shut the window.

So that's the toilet. A.T was pleased. Now all he had to do was wait.

Like a serious wildlife photographer, he waited all day long. When he got hungry he popped a *methi laddoo* in his mouth. All day there was no sight of Raswe. And just as A.T started to think of Plan B a voice in his

head said *Raswe's chances of not getting caught smoking are highest post midnight. For that's when most people are asleep.*

The last train passed at 1:15 A.M. However, there was no sign of Raswe. A.T was tired and wanted to catch a few winks but he decided against it.

Half an hour later, when A.T heard a soft yet persistent growl, like that of a generator, he looked up from his binoculars. At a distance he saw a yellow tamping machine chug along to do its railway maintenance job. *'Does the city ever sleep?'* thought A.T and looked back into his binoculars. Someone was at the window, smoking! He saw the silhouette of a rather short and scrawny human being. It was a Friday.

At 1:45 A.M on Sunday, when he heard the growl of the tamping machine, A.T looked through the sight of his Remington 700, held his breath and nimbly pulled the trigger of his rifle.

"A police van was burnt when Mohan Raswe was found dead in his toilet." Reporter Bhaskar Menon shouted out loud from the scene of the crime.



9:50 pm
20th May 1999
Police Headquarters,
Crawford Market, Mumbai

ACP Pathak was alone, as he overheard the recorded mobile conversation between the two men.

"Come to the point yaar... so you are saying he will have to go? Huh? Hello... Hello... Can you hear me?" Speaker No.1 was in a hurry, as always.

"I can hear you clearly," said Speaker No.2. He was unperturbed as usual. "Let's go ahead with The Plan. There is no scope of backfire. We will have to let him go."

"Theek hain... Keep me posted." Click.

The 2 men hung up. Pathak switched the mobile off. He removed the duplicate SIM Card. The number belonged to Speaker No. 1: Khalif Ahmed. The 2nd speaker was Babban Mistry. Making sure no one was looking, he kept the SIM in his drawer and locked it.

This conversation had taken place early that year in January. Pathak was trying to see if he could find anything about Raswe's or Apte's death. But there was nothing. He kept wondering who they were referring to?

'The Plan', he had overheard several times, was so audacious that it was almost impractical. However, the conversation was a gold mine of intelligence tips. The kind of leads, an honest cop would want to work on.

But Pathak knew the system too well.

He decided he'd 'allow' the bastards to kill each other and step in at crucial junctures. Picking his .38 Titan Tiger revolver, he stuck it into the stiff case attached to his belt and walked out.

As Pathak paced down stately corridors of Police Headquarters nodding at those who wished him, his mind was racing with thoughts. One was the conversation between the gangsters. The other was the death of Mohan Raswe. The city was one gangster less and he was going to celebrate with his boys in Police Gymkhana.

From Khalif and Usman Ali gangs, to the builder lobby and 'Encounter Specialists' of the Crime Branch, many glasses clinked in merriment that night. From seedy dance bars in Chembur to the Royal Suite of a 5 Star hotel, many were glad that Mohan Raswe had died and none of them had to work hard for it.

The one who had carried out the incredible execution sat alone in his single room pad. The soothing sounds of Buddha Bar Volume 1 killed the din from the *chawl* outside. A.T poured himself a peg of The Macallan and added 6 cubes of ice. Then bringing the glass under his nose, he sniffed it gently. Taking a swig, he checked on the mince while it cooked in the pan.

A.T enjoyed the ritual. After a kill, he would come home, bathe and fix a stiff peg of single malt. Then he'd prepare a feast. The entire process of cooking was so fulfilling that he almost had no appetite to eat after that. Tonight, he was making Shepherd's Pie.

He was pleased with himself. Despite the overpowering obstructions of 8 lines of overhead cables he had shot the bull's eye. It tested his skill as a shooter. A.T was proud. However, in the moment he had to admit that killing Mohan Raswe had not been as challenging as executing MLA Lalit Apte. From all the assassinations over the years, he took great pride in the Lalit Apte shoot-out. The MLA had a Y-security cover comprising 11 policemen during the day and even when he slept he had the privilege of X-security: 2 policemen at his door. Ensnared in a heavy security blanket it had been difficult to shoot the MLA dead.

But A.T had done it. By deducing that the only way to shoot the man was on the crown; at an angle of 180 degrees from the top when he was entering his apartment building. But it was not just the shoot-out. He had hidden in a flat to carry out the assassination and the apartment housed an old man suffering from advanced Alzheimer's. The sight still made him shudder. It reminded him of seeing his helpless father in childhood.

Dismissing that thought, now, A.T inhaled a drag of his cigarette while he switched off the gas. Just then his Motorola beeped. This time there was no message or any cryptic text. There was a name:

Virendra Saxena.

| 2

2 Months Later.

4th July 1999
9:00 A.M
City News Bureau,
Worli, Mumbai

“Heard of A.T.?” asked Agastya Sengupta without looking up from the newspaper.

Looking at his bald pate, as he stood huddled over reading Times of India, 22-year-old Ritika Khanolker braced herself to answer the question she had expected her Bureau Chief to ask on the first day of her first job.

“At 2:30 A.M on the 27th of May, 28-year-old A.T Pradhan was arrested red handed by ACP Pathak, at Sanjay Gandhi National Park. With a Remington 700 in hand, it is alleged that he was attempting to shoot builder Virendra Saxena who was in the car with a friend called Jolly Singh. Saxena is the chief complainant while Jolly Singh testified as the eye-witness. He was produced in court the next day, and was represented

by none other than legal superstar Jaidev Bhimani, who made sure that A.T got judicial custody and was out on bail the very next day. A.T claims that he is a trained rifle shooter and was practicing his aim. ACP Pathak on the other hand said he caught him red-handed with a gun aimed at Virendra Saxena from a distance of 30 meters. In fast track, today, A.T will be tried in the Sessions Court with Jaidev Bhimani as his defense lawyer. There are rumours that he could be the elusive shooter of the Khalif Ahmed Gang.”

Ritika spewed information about A.T, the recent Crime Sensation who had taken the city by storm.

She was pleased with herself and was sure that Bureau Chief Agastya Sengupta would be just as pleased. But the veteran continued to read the newspaper.

Ritika waited hopefully.

She had followed his op-ed pages in India Era ever since she was in the 6th grade. Down the years when Sengupta moved to other English dailies – she subscribed to those newspapers as well. Sengupta’s columns on the socio-economic and political climate of the country, along with televised shows like, India This Week and World In A Fasttrack had helped Ritika Khanolker shape her world-view.

Today on the anvil of a brand-new career as a TV news reporter, she stood tall in her petite five-foot frame. Her dusky complexion had a warm glow, her eyes twinkled with enthusiasm. For she was a reporter in a country that believed in the freedom of the press, she thought. *‘Reporters in India have the freedom of speech. Her citizens have access to international news along with national interests.’* And while she waited for her Bureau Chief to react, she tugged her mop of soft curls. In the moment, Ritika thought of all the countries where media was strictly controlled by the government; where news was ‘fed’ to reporters. From shutting out international media, to dictatorial control on domestic coverage - countries like North Korea, Syria and Iran, Eritrea, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, granted restricted information to its people. *‘India would not be a democracy in the true sense if her media was restricted so,’* Ritika said to herself as she looked around the pokey cabin.

The only redeeming factor about her internship in the start-up City News, was that it belonged to veteran Agastya Sengupta. He had converted a 2 Bedroom Hall Kitchen into a cramped office complete with recording

studio, edit bay, editor's cabin, reporters' workstation and an equipment room.

With her grades Ritika had hoped to intern with one of the flagship networks of the country. Like NNN, short for, National News Network. But jobs were scarce and City News, a local cable news station was the only one to offer a placement.

Though she was disheartened at first, she kept reminding herself, *'I have to be grateful. If I have it in me, I will move to bigger things in life.'* She would make the best of this place. She'd take up any assignments her Chief had to offer. She was ready and eager.

But Sengupta had not acknowledged her answer. Perhaps he was preoccupied and it had slipped his mind.

"Sir?" she asked softly.

"I asked you to tell me about A.T.," he said as he reached for a pair of scissors.

"I just did," said Ritika hoping that he'd at least look her in the eye.

"Tell me something I don't know. Give me new information. Not some copy-paste from other channels and newspapers." Saying this he looked up at Ritika and explained, "That, young lady, is the job of a reporter."

Lesson No. 1, noted Ritika.

Sengupta got back to his article and started to cut it. "Go to Sessions Court. You will meet Ashu, the cameraman. Actually, Bhaskar should have covered the court proceeding but he is in Guruvayoor on a temple visit. You leave." He ordered without looking up.

"Sir?"

"Hmmm?" asked Sengupta as he focused on cutting with precision.

"Where is Sessions Court?"

Sengupta did not merit her question with an answer. He simply looked up and stared at her.

"I will find out," she said and left.



After tending change, Ritika alighted from the taxi and looked around. Jostling against one another, photographers and cameramen were making space for themselves. Journalists stood in groups of two and three. Some had cutting *chai* and many smoked cigarettes. There was a smattering of Khaki-clad policemen. Walking around in white-neck ties, lawyers were out-numbered on their turf as A.T's court hearing had transformed the otherwise dull Sessions Court into a media carnival.

A bespectacled young man, sporting a goatee walked up to her and smiled.

“Ritika Khanolker,” he stated. Before Ritika could reply he put his hand out, “Ashu. Ashutosh Nagpal – I am your camera and sound guy rolled into one.”

“Hi!” said Ritika pleasantly, “How did you guess?”

“Everyone around is a seasoned player. You looked out-of-place, so...”

Ashu was straightforward and that put her at ease right away. Ritika then asked Ashu what had to be done. He told her: where cars usually stopped, so he'd get shots of A.T getting off the car and later walking into the compound of the Sessions Court. “I just hope he comes with Jaidev Bhimani, which will add to the drama,” mulled Ashu, running his fingers through his beard.

“What do I have to do Ashu?” asked Ritika.

“I will give you a cordless mike. At the end of the court hearing, when reporters swarm around Jaidev Bhimani, Virendra Saxena and A.T, just push your mike forward. That's it. You are set.”

“But I want an exclusive!”

“With whom?”

“A.T,” said Ritika brimming with confidence and naiveté.

Just then a hefty woman in her 30s walked up to Ashu.

“Hi Sulochana!” said Ashu. Sulochana gave him a high-five. Shaking hands with Ritika she introduced herself, “Sulochana Sharma from Samachar.” On her part, Ritika felt a surge of pride as she introduced herself to a senior reporter, “Ritika Khanolker, City News.”

“Never seen you. First day?”

“Of my first job, yes,” replied Ritika with a smile.

“Welcome to the jungle,” said Sulochana as she removed a packet of Goldflake from her rattan sling. “Ashu?” Sulochana offered putting out the packet of cigarettes. Ashu declined politely and excused himself saying, “I will leave now.”

“Relax,” said Sulochana. “A.T won’t come until noon.”

Ritika looked at her watch. It was only 10:00 am.

“*Achcha?* How can you be so sure?” asked Ashu.

“17 years in this profession. I have contacts baby,” shrugged Sulochana.

“But I have to be on stand-by or else I will lose my place. Ritika I will be there,” he said pointing to a cluster of cameramen and photographers.

Ritika’s mind was racing. She hoped to learn about real crime cases in the two hours they had to spare and meet more journalists through Sulochana. What was the point of just hanging around, she thought? “I will be with Sulochana,” she said to Ashu.

“On-field you are only *with* yourself,” said Ashu and left.

Lesson No.2.



Sulochana and Ritika sat on a concrete circumference of a banyan tree. Sulochana then lit her cigarette with a match. Taking a long drag, she asked, “Why did you choose crime reporting?”

Ritika was taken aback. Sulochana adjusted her *dupatta* and said “Take my word and do something like entertainment or fashion. It’s fun. Crime is a rotten beat.”

“Why are you doing it then?”

“Habit” said Sulochana and took yet another drag.

She then continued about how crime reporting was a male bastion. Every day one had to fight to get information. Policemen found it easy to confide in male reporters. She, Sulochana, then had to cajole the male reporters for leads, links or information tips. The male reporters played God- doling out only those scraps of knowledge that suited them.

As Sulochana spoke, Ritika listened carefully to the things Sulochana said, but more importantly to what she *did* not say. Ritika noticed her senior’s faded *kurti*, dry feet, cracked soles and bitten fingernails. Ritika

noticed the bitterness in Sulochana's eyes over-shadowed by an over-friendly demeanour. *What was Sulochana hiding?*

Ending her diatribe Sulochana said, "And the irony of it all is that during an interview you refer to a gangster as *sir!*"

Ritika jumped! "Which gangster have you interviewed?"

"No one yet, but I will sometime soon."

Just then there was an upsurge! A group screamed indistinctly. People looked in the direction of the noise. Ritika then saw a bustle of activity. Sulochana dropped her burning cigarette and got up announcing "A.T has arrived!"

Saying this she ran in the direction of the van, without waiting for Ritika.

Ritika looked at her watch. It was ten minutes passed ten. An hour fifty before Sulochana's information. A wry smile flitted across her face as she decided, *'I will never allow myself to become Sulochana Sharma.'*

Lesson No. 3.



| 3

As defense lawyer Jaidev Bhimani walked towards the Sessions Court, cameramen started to shoot images of the superstar. The short octogenarian walked briskly, unaffected, though well aware of the flashbulbs, rolling cameras and admiration of lawyers who had congregated to catch a glimpse of him.

Jaidev Bhimani was their hero. He had created an empire out of law. As he walked down, Ritika was quick to note that his success made the old man look attractive. Bhimani had amassed great amount of wealth by sheer grit, hard work and an above average intelligence.

His 40 something wife was a celebrity in South Mumbai soirees. There were rumours that she had, over the years, collected Limited Editions of handbags, slings, totes and clutches that were immaculately maintained in an air-conditioned walk-in, exclusively made for them.

Following suit was the poster boy of the builder lobby, Virendra Saxena. The chief complainant of the case. A.T was allegedly caught aiming his Remington 700 at the young 20 something dapper builder in the middle of the night in Sanjay Gandhi National Park.

What could the builder be doing there in the middle of the night? Ritika, like many others who were following the case often asked that question. Surrounded by his personal bodyguards as well as two police officers, to the manor born Virendra Saxena, oozed panache as he moved swiftly towards the courtroom.

Ritika had missed seeing A.T. However, she knew that she would see enough of him during the court hearing.

Ritika followed other journalists as they walked up to the court room. She looked forward to witnessing her first real life court proceeding. However, since it involved an attempt to murder a celebrity builder, the courtroom was packed to capacity and had exploded from its seams.

“Excuse me, excuse me” she said as she inched forward, elbowing her way till she reached a spot where crowd was standstill.

“Press. Excuse Me, I am from City News. Please let me go ahead. Press. I can’t hear anything.” There were two men standing in front of her. Ritika hoped they would give her space. One of them craned his neck back and said, “Nor can we...which newspaper you said you were from?” he asked after a beat.

“TV Channel. City News.”

“Give my regards to Agastya!”

“And you are...?”

“Venkat Prasad, News Asia.”

“Can I stand in front of you Venkat?”

“Doesn’t matter, we will all get the same information.”

But that is not what Ritika wanted. She did not want to simply write what had happened. She wanted to share something more with her viewers... something that she perceived or an answer she got from the accused which no one else did.

However, in the moment, Ritika was overwhelmed with pride. Here she was! In Sessions Court flocked with reporters, lawyers, judges, police officers, witnesses and the accused. She was in the dead center of ‘The System’. She was meant to be here, she had always known.

As minutes passed, Ritika caught onto words like 'Bail', 'ACP Pathak', 'Lack of Evidence', 'Rejected to file charge sheet' etc. There was a lull in the proceedings and suddenly an uproar. People started coming out of the courtroom clamoring “witness turned hostile”. The proceeding had not taken very long. It had ended before it even started.

Ritika spotted Sulochana. On seeing Ritika, Sulochana said, “Builder Virendra Saxena took his complaint back as he claims he did not even see A.T at the spot. He had made that complaint based on some crank calls he had got. He thought those calls were from the underworld, but it was a group of friends trying to play a prank on him. ”

“So then?”

“Case dismissed.”

It was the speediest trial ever! Sulochana rambled on. “A.T was arrested by ACP Pathak during an attempt to murder Virendra Saxena. During the interrogation A.T confessed to the offence. But in court he stated that he confessed under duress, ‘I have no police records. I am a trained rifle shooter with awards to my credit. My only fault was that I was carrying a Remington in the middle of the night. However, I do have a license for the same. The torture was unbearable so I confessed to the crime.’” Sulochana informed and continued, “Jaidev Bhimani then cross-examined ACP Pathak and other police witnesses in such a way that no link could be established between the shooter, the weapon and the target. All evidence collected painstakingly by ACP Pathak was crafted as ‘non-indicative’ by Bhimani. When Virendra Saxena was made to testify he turned around and said he wanted to take his complaint back. He had not seen A.T. And an eye witness called Jolly Singh who was in the car with Saxena said that the Police had coerced him to be a witness. He had not seen A.T either. And thus, the witness turned hostile and the Judge, under Section 169, dismissed the case,” explained Sulochana as they walked out of Sessions Court.

Ritika then looked out for Ashu who waved back at her with a cordless mike in hand. She walked up to him and took the mike. It had a removable cube with City -News written on it. Ritika smiled. It was her turn now to ask questions. She re-joined Sulochana who was standing alongside a group of journalists.

Ritika thought he’d be jubilant, but Jaidev Bhimani looked unaffected when he walked out. Journalists clustered around Bhimani. Ritika held her mike too and struggled to get ahead. Someone jabbed a mike on her shoulder. ‘Sorry’ said the journalist without looking at her.

And Jaidev Bhimani addressed the media, “My client Mr. A.T Pradhan was wrongly accused by the Mumbai Police. He is a trained rifle shooter with medals and certificates to show. My client was trying to experiment his aim in the dark. No link could be established between the weapon and the target. Prosecution failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt. And so, A.T was rightfully acquitted of the alleged offence.”

“Don’t you think that justice was way too speedy?” asked one journalist.

“Don’t you think, it is high time, courts in India worked like that?” asked Jaidev Bhimani with a smile.

From Virendra Saxena’s pace it was clear that he did not wish to speak. It would be embarrassing to state what he was doing in a prohibited area of the national park in the dead of the night. He did not want to open the Pandora’s Box of his dark habits.

The media rushed to Virendra Saxena and blocked his path. “Excuse me, no comments, excuse me, no comments,” he clipped as he started to make his way out.

“Let the boy be you buggers!” bellowed Bhimani jokingly as he walked past. Virendra Saxena looked at Bhimani and smiled. The octogenarian waved as he waited for Saxena to join him.

Journalists surrounded the two men. Despite their efforts to listen to the contents of the conversation, they could not hear Bhimani as he whispered into Saxena’s ears. “Lots of bugs in the bar son and some of them have recently travelled to the bench. Don’t worry.” Saying this he got into the backseat of his Mercedes.

Virendra Saxena got into his Porsche and zipped off. The journalists could not get a sound bite from the poster boy of the builder lobby.

When ACP Pathak came out with his clique, journalists ran up to him. From the way they addressed him, it seemed like he was their blue-eyed boy. Pathak was the face of the Mumbai Police and often gave his opinion when he was asked to. He was called ‘Top Cop’ by the press. However, Pathak’s replies were rehearsed. He did not reveal anything more than what was already said in court.

-How does it feel to lose a case?

-It’s alright. The honourable court has pronounced its verdict.

-How did you get tipped about the alleged plot to murder?

-It was an unknown phone call.

-Will you be tracking A.T’s every move from now?

-I have no reason to. The court has pronounced him innocent.

Saying this Pathak walked towards his jeep. After all, he was a police officer on duty. He had to say the right things, do the right things. He was chained by the very organization he was an inherent part of.

Though everything was happening at break neck speed, and Ritika had no time to breathe, she was feeling low. For she had not got a single answer to any of the questions she had tried to ask. Either it was ignored in the case of Saxena or she was too far behind in the case of Bhimani and ACP Pathak's answers were rehearsed.

There was nothing she had that she could own. Her report would be like everyone else's. *Maybe I am getting impatient. It is my first day*, she tried to explain to herself. *I am an intern*, she thought placating her restlessness. *So what?* Her inner critic defied. She wanted something special to happen.

And just then, A.T walked out. Lithe at 6 feet, A.T looked calm, yet alert. His stride was agile. Though expressionless, he looked like an angel. His complexion was smooth and he was fairer than the mug shots she had seen in the newspapers. Ritika could not believe that this attractive man, no more than 28 years of age could be the messenger of death.

Ritika smiled as she stared at A.T. *He hardly looks like a killer.*

"Cute!" gushed one reporter to another. The two women giggled.

He was flanked by two young men around his age. One was puny, the other was dark and big and both were unable to mask their awe. As soon as A.T and the men were out of the court premises they were thronged by cameramen, photographers and journalists. A.T seemed totally unaffected by the mayhem.

- Why would you want to practice in the National Park?
- Is it true that you are professional shooter for the underworld?
- Who was with Saxena?
- What weapon did you carry?
- Where is Khalif Ahmed hiding these days?
- Did you shoot Saxena?
- Was Saxena coerced by your gang to withdraw his complaint?
- How long have you been working?

A.T did not say a word. He put his hand aside and one of his 2 escorts, the puny one, opened a Ray Ban case. A.T wore his aviators and continued to walk giving more photo-opportunities to the media. He did not respond to the journalists however.

- How much do you earn A.T?

He turned to face the voice. It was Ritika Khanolker.

- You must make a lot of money to be able to afford Jaidev Bhimani. We all know he does not come cheap. So, Mr. A.T, tell us how does someone like you afford the services of the best lawyer in the country? Who is your rich daddy?

He stared at her. And she stared right back. The lethal man with A.T gave her a menacing look. Then putting his arm around A.T, he goaded him towards a Black Prado with dark tinted windows. The puny man opened the rear door for A.T. From the corner of her eye Ritika noticed that there was another person already seated inside. However, before she could catch a glimpse of him, A.T took his aviators off and glanced at Ritika Khanolker. She stared back unperturbed. A.T got into his car and drove off.

Other reporters looked at Ritika. 'Who asks these kinds of questions?' 'Stupid questions' someone said. 'Who is she?', 'Maybe some new person' ... Then she heard a snigger, then the *Tch! Tch!* of disapproval.

But Ritika did not care. For she had managed to make A.T stop in his tracks and take notice. Of her.

That was enough for a start.

○○○

| 4

Despite the black window film of the windows of the Prado, A.T waited for the journalists and photographers to go out of sight. Then he turned to the elderly gentleman who was seated in the SUV. The two men smiled at one another and *ankchoo*, the old man sneezed out loud.

Wiping his ruddy nose with a handkerchief he said endearingly, “Welcome back A.T.”

“I have you to thank Mistry Seth. Thank you,” said A.T with a hint of smile.

Babban Mistry smiled back and looked away. Probably in his late fifties or early sixties, Mistry wore a safari suit. Bald and bespectacled, his beefy fingers were bejeweled with semi-precious stones. He was one of those who nursed a perpetual cold.

...And except for Babban Mistry’s intermittent sneezing, the Prado rumbled on silently. Everyone was unnaturally quiet. To A.T it seemed as if Mistry was in deep thought.

As the city passed by, A.T hoped Mistry would introduce him to the two young boys seated in front.

Pint-sized, in the driver’s seat was Hakim. From the way he had given his sunglasses, to the way he ran to hold the door open, A.T noticed that his body language was suffused in servility.

Next to him was Munawar. Blood shot eyes, dark face, a broad muscular build, an air of arrogance and thick gold bracelets piled one

on top of the other— he looked like a gangster straight out of the movies. Clearly, he was the ‘fear factor’ of the gang.

‘They too must be summing me up. I wonder what they think of me...do they even know who I am?’ thought A.T.

Until the arrest, no one in the Khalif Gang had heard of A.T. After his bail, the only people he met were Bhimani and Babban Mistry. It was Mistry who tutored him on what to do, where to stay and what to say once he was out on bail. However, there was one piece of the puzzle A.T could not solve.

‘Who could have informed Pathak? Only Mistry knew. And he is the one I report to,’ thought A.T all along. In ten years of their association, A.T and Mistry had worked well. A.T was a tidy strategist. And Mistry’s pockets ran deep. It was Mistry who had given him his infamous although a very profitable career. Mistry had never demonstrated his clout unlike other mafia top guys who resorted to bullying, foul language and politics with their subordinates. In fact, he was mild-mannered and A.T had always liked him. Even when he was arrested, A.T assumed that Mistry would bail him out. But Babban Mistry, an old hand made sure, A.T was a free man today!

Money to Bhimani and the Judge, promise of ‘extra protection’ to Saxena in return for dropping charges and a simple threat to Jolly Singh had done the trick. He had been told to change his statement. If he did, he would be rewarded with an all-expense paid shopping trip to London and Paris. If he did not, he would be shot in the balls during the court proceeding itself. Munawar and Hakim were at the court to do just that.

What could have gone wrong? Who could have slipped up... These questions had been ringing through from the moment of his arrest, to an incessant interrogation, to hiding in a cache after his bail to now. For A.T had always been painstaking to a fault. He had neither left a trace nor had he missed a shot.

Ankchoo! Just as Mistry sneezed out loud, his brick-size Nokia rang.

“Headquarters,” he said and let out another sneeze. Headquarters meant a call from Khalif Ahmed. A.T sat up. He had never spoken to him, nor was he ever around when ‘Boss’ called.

“Hello Boss!” said Mistry and heard him out.

“Haan Boss... *jee* Boss, *zaroor*... as you say,” Mistry kept repeating.

“Yes Boss ...” continued Mistry. “Clean chit from the court ... Hmmm... Even I am surprised! I have put Inspector Kaloti on the job... Yes *apna* Double *Dholki* ...you can pay him and he will shift sides. So, what if he is on Usman’s pay roll? If the tip was given by Usman we will know ... Boss I get a feeling it was Usman Ali who gave the lead to Pathak via Kaloti about A.T.

A.T’s ears perked at the mention of Usman. *How did Usman get to know about me?* A.T started making mental notes of the places he had visited to survey Virendra Saxena’s whereabouts. At that moment, A.T turned to the side and noticed that Mistry was not his usual self. Something was bothering Mistry. Looking away, A.T then saw an old man totter across the road out of turn. “Go slow,” said A.T to Hakim. The car dropped speed.

Mistry then nudged A.T with his mobile and sniffed his cold away. It was the first time Boss wanted to speak to A.T.

“Hello Sir, I mean Boss,” A.T quickly corrected himself.

And then he heard the man on the other end. Khalif Ahmed had a thin raspy voice, contrary to the deep baritone, one would associate with the head of a global crime syndicate. And he spoke in haste, as if he was running out of time.

Boss mentioned that he was happy that A.T did not spill much during Police Interrogation. But that was not the reason he was speaking to him personally.

And then Boss gave him the news. “A.T you have been an asset to my gang for so many years. But you are more than just a shooter. I want you to head the Mumbai operations for me.”

A.T sat up as he listened carefully. “Mistry is getting old,” Boss stated and continued, “You know a lot more. Computers, technology and the world of dot com. You have a wealth of information that you never flaunt. Mistry has told me how you spend 5 hours a day keeping abreast of news in India as well as around the globe. I need to inject freshness and vitality into Mumbai operations. From now on Mistry will take orders from you. You take charge and rule the city. You will be backed by all our connections. The ministers, police and industrialists...all our allies. And to rule the city your first assignment would be to eliminate Usman.”

“Sure,” stated A.T, happy to oblige.

“No no...you cannot kill Usman the way you killed Mohan or Apte or any of those other targets! Word spreads. People speculate. I want no one pointing fingers at me over Usman’s death. You get it? No one can blame Khalif Ahmed or anybody from his gang. Keep that in mind. Can you kill him without a gun? I want you to come up with a fool proof plan to eliminate Usman *without using the gun*. That will be your test as a leader. Keep me posted,” saying this Boss hung up. He was not a man to waste his words. A.T liked that about him.

Handing the phone to Mistry, A.T was quiet. The old man hung his head low and sniffed. Staring at A.T, he announced to everyone in the car, “Munawar, Hakim. Say hello to your new Chief. He is going to be running the business from now on.”

Caught unawares, Munawar slowly turned his head back and stared at Mistry. Hakim too turned for a beat and looked back at the road, his mouth agape. Mistry could not stop smiling sadly. A.T felt bad for him.

“Mistry *seth*, you will always be my mentor. I have had nothing to do with this decision,” said A.T.

“I know *beta*.” It was the first time Mistry had called him son. “I will be there for you every step of the way. Boss gets what he wants. And he wants Usman Ali out, without us getting involved. That’s all you have to bear in mind. Don’t worry about anything else,” saying this Mistry blew his nose.

Mistry then instructed Hakim that they had to go to A.T’s current home in Lower Parel, help him pack and head back to Worli that evening. “To your new home A.T, our new Head Quarter,” he said.

Mistry explained that as head of the gang he was entitled to a new residence. Plus, now that he had been under arrest it made sense to change location as the police would be keeping a watch on him. Thirdly, instructed Mistry, that they should keep changing the location of their rendezvous. They could meet at his plush home, or sometimes in a run down, under construction building, at Irani cafés or even Mistry’s home. Changing meeting places and cars were the easiest way to avoid police surveillance. The old man added that every time he needed a new car, Hakim was the man to approach.

And then Mistry made formal introductions of names and profiles. Babban Mistry handled finance for the gang and would continue to do so.

Munawar was the head of narcotics and extortion. Hakim was in charge of talent. Under Hakim were foot soldiers in a specific hierarchy. Every foot soldier only knew of one head above them. Even if they were caught and spoke up during interrogation no one could reach up to Hakim. The men under Hakim had never seen Mistry as secrecy was paramount in the underworld. Mistry, Hakim and Munawar were the cream of Khalif's gang, his chief lieutenants.

"And now," said Mistry, "A.T you will be the brain, the strategist of The Khalif Gang. If you prove your mettle, the sky is the limit, I assure you. And your first target is Usman."

As the Prado gathered speed on Haji Ali, A.T started to think of ways to eliminate Usman— the gang lord who had stood the test of time even when others in the Mumbai mafia, including the larger-than-life Khalif Ahmed, had escaped the shores of the Arabian Sea.



After packing his belongings from a single room in a chawl in Parel, that evening, A.T and gang drove into the upscale Lady Pochkhanawala Road in Worli.

Hakim missed the speed breaker. The SUV bumped and there was a loud clang.

"Careful Hakim!" A.T snapped. There were bottles of The Macallan, The Glenlivet, The Balvenie, Monkey Shoulder and Jack Daniel's in the boot. A.T loved his food and drink. Since he was often given 'international contracts', A.T came back with bottles of dry herbs, pasta sauces, couscous and cheese. He loved European cuisine and in 1999 there was only Foodland in Juhu that stocked Gouda, Camembert or Blue Cheese.

The only thing lacking in life at home, was that there was no one he could share a freshly made bruschetta with. Or someone who could appreciate the delicate flavours of grilled tomatoes stuffed with couscous, accompanied with a glass of sparkling Veuve Clicquot.

Or sip the golden magic of The Macallan topped with 6 cubes of ice. A.T liked his whiskey with ice. He could not understand the soda- water fascination most men had. According to A.T single malt was meant to be had neat. 6 cubes of ice were perfect to counter the mugginess in Mumbai.

Now with his new position, A.T hoped to meet people with better taste. People who could tell the specific brand of whiskey in a swig. For most drinkers could never tell the difference. For them whiskey was 'daaru', and A.T found that blasphemous.

The Prado drove into a sea-facing high rise called Cliflet Apartments. Mistry looked at A.T and said, "Virendra Saxena". A.T got the hint. This was Saxena's condo. The builder and Boss had been friends in the past. Now, A.T decided he would find out why Virendra Saxena was targeted then. "Very soon you will have to deal with Saxena one-on-one," said Mistry as they got off and walked towards the lift.

'The underworld is a mirage. Friends or foes mean nothing. Manipulation is the name of the game' thought A.T.

The reception of the building was sleek. A.T's sharp gaze quickly scanned the names of residents. Except for a solitary reaper, F. Dadyburjor, most of them were *Sindhis* and *Gujaratis*. There was one flat per floor. The last floor flat had no name. He knew that would be his.

Then Mistry whispered, "I know you will fit in with the rich and the sophisticated. Just smile a bit, have some people over maybe... The idea is to not arouse suspicion. Be aloof but smile at those who wish you. They are all rich daddies. You get the idea? And yeah... no guns ... Don't keep any guns at home. You know, just in case someone gets suspicious and files a complaint."

A.T nodded, acknowledging what Mistry said. However, he could not live without his guns. He'd make a cache in his apartment to keep them without anyone's knowledge, he resolved.

As they went up 10 floors, Mistry gave further instructions. "We will meet here often. Not always but this will also be used as an office for the 4 of us. And now," said Mistry as they stepped out on to the 10th floor. "Congratulations A.T. Welcome to your new home," saying this Mistry gave him the key.

A.T opened the door and glanced around. The apartment had an open design that allowed for easy transition between spaces. A.T walked in. The entire place was styled in a dark grey palette. The living room furniture was sleek, slim and minimal with; black leather sofa, a square metallic table in the center and a large leather arm chair that faced a massive TV screen.

When he saw a 6-seat dining table, A.T knew that that's where the gang would sit and discuss work. He thought of Mistry's steam inhalations in his extra -large aluminum pot. Now that was going to be an eye-sore. Mistry's steam inhalations were legendary, just like his persistent cold. Much wisdom and strategic moves were planned and executed during the daily ritual. And though the sight was not a pleasant one, A.T knew he had no power to stop him. *Well, not just yet.*

The sideboard behind the table served as a multipurpose unit: with a bar, a wine cellar and counter top to prepare drinks. Next to the dining area were large French windows that opened into the terrace. The high rise would have ample sunshine during the day. Now, in the night the house had a dark masculine décor.

And when he turned around A.T fell in love. It was a grey streamlined open-kitchen with a wooden floor and a white table top in the center. A long overhead lamp hung from the ceiling. The shade was a transparent glass bulb. "*A bulb within a bulb... lovely!*" thought A.T and switched the light on. The play of light had a dramatic effect on the white island that had an inset cutting board to chop, cut and scrape... activities that A.T found relaxing.

There was a wide single door refrigerator next to a fully equipped cooking range where he could grill or bake as he wished. The space between the counter and cabinets was tiled with white marble. Through the sheer kitchen curtain, A.T could see his favourite *Tulsi* and *Ajwain* plants on the sill.

Reading his thoughts, Mistry spoke out loud, "Boss takes good care of us. It's your job to take care of our business now."

A.T smiled and said, "This kitchen whets my appetite to demolish Usman Ali." His uber stylish dream apartment fortified the killer instinct in him. He was ready to soar.

Mistry's phone rang. Looking at the screen he sneezed and stated, "Nagarajan Iyer, Times of the Nation." Then answering the phone, he walked out to the terrace.

In the meantime, A.T switched-on his massive TV set. Channels on the screen set kept changing until he stopped at NNN, India's premier English News channel. The news caster was speaking about how the A.T case had been the speediest trial ever. Another news channel speculated

on how the underworld had tentacles that clawed into the legal system as well. The third intellectualized the nexus between the state machinery of political parties-police- judiciary and the underworld.

Hindi Channels sensationalized the story. As he continued to press the remote, the channels changed from national television to local networks. He stopped at City News. For he saw Ritika Khanolker, the reporter who had asked him uncomfortable questions that morning. 'She looks so naïve... and she is so young.' A smile flit across his face as he studied her. Long soft curls, innocence writ large on a dusky face and yet, a steely determination in the eyes- to A.T she was a paradox of sorts.

The image on the TV screen was split between the two of them: Ritika with her City News mike and the footage of A.T outside Sessions Court. "...And in the latest development this morning..."

A.T's gaze was transfixed on the screen. As he involuntarily twirled the remote in his hand, he went into deep thought. He looked away and glanced back sharply at Ritika Khanolker. His mind was scheming...

It was an outrageous plan, but if executed with precision Usman Ali would be dead without his gang getting involved.

Mistry came back and stated, "Naga wants to do an exclusive with you."

A.T nodded looking at the screen. Mistry saw Ritika and recalled her from earlier in the morning. He then saw A.T stare at her.

Without taking his eyes off the TV, A.T told Mistry "she is of great use to us."

- This one?! She is so young... what can she do? Listen I have contacts with veterans ...*apna Naga* is big!

- He is of no use. She is young and ambitious.

- C'mon...Munawar told me about the questions she asked you. If you ask me, I think she is stupid. Who asks how much one earns and how Bhimani does not come cheap?

- She is the only one I remember from the crowd of journalists. I think she is brave.

- There is a thin line between stupidity and bravado A.T.

- And that thin line is success.

Saying this A.T got up and walked to the bar. “Over drinks, give me a low down on every business of Usman Ali. I want to know everything you know,” he said to Babban Mistry.

It was time to fix himself a peg of *The Macallan* in his plush new home.



| 5

Her pokey home on the fifth floor of Ram Niwaas was warm and her parents, welcoming. But in the moment, she wished that the guests would go away. She wanted to share this moment with the two people who mattered most.

However, *Aai* had invited the entire neighbourhood of Mangal Wadi to watch her only child's television debut that evening. She had made steaming hot *batata wadas* and fresh ginger tea. Fried to its ochre perfection, the guests blew out the curls of smoke and bit hungrily into the spicy mash of potato. Each bite was spiked with just the right amount of green chilly that caused the secretion of extra saliva, making the guests hungrier for their next mouthful.

With one eye on the Onida box-TV, *Baba* welcomed his neighbours with a big broad smile. "Come," he said to no one in particular.

"Is the show over?" asked the effervescent Chitre *Kaka* as he removed his frayed *chappals* outside her flat.

"News bulletin you mean," Ritika tried to cover up his faux pas.

"*Haan, haan* same thing," said Chitre *Kaka* dismissively.

"*Arrey* don't worry Chitre... they have gone for a commercial break. Ritika will be back after 2 minutes," said her father.

A minute later, when Ritika was back on-air, the din in the flat hushed to silence. All eyes were glued to the TV screen. The thick-set *Aai* who

had seen the news clip twice before, looked at the screen and folding her bulbous arms spoke out loud, “Just look at her! Any man will marry my daughter.”

Ritika grit her teeth as she stared at the TV screen. In solidarity *Baba* gently put his arm around his daughter. There was no point arguing with a wife whose single-point agenda now was to find a suitable match for Ritika.



The next evening, Ritika and Ashu were seated in the City News Maruti van. They were on their way back to the office after covering a Police Press Conference. Ashu noticed that Ritika was in deep thought. *‘What could be it?’* he wondered. Ashu had liked Ritika from the moment they had met. It was only their second day on field together, but Ashu was enjoying her company already.

“Is something bothering you?” he asked. Without looking at him Ritika nodded ‘no’. Clearly something was.

Ritika’s mind was racing. Because of the nature of her job, every reporter was called for a Press conference. She took notes, met some more reporters, who in turn introduced her to Pathak and other police officers. *But what about the story?* She’d have the same story that every other reporter in this city had. In the moment she felt like a police stenographer. She wanted to be exclusive. She wanted to break news. She wanted to be the first to know. She wanted to be the first to figure it all out. At the same time, she also knew that she was being unreasonable and impatient. That’s what Ashu would say as well if she told him about what bothered her.

“Ashu?” she asked as she turned to face him “How does one come up with fresh stories. Those that no one else has access to?”

“By making and cultivating sources,” he replied pat. Ashu went on to explain that a reporter had to establish a network of people comprising senior reporters, police officers, lawyers and *khabrees*.

“Who? *Khabree?*” asked Ritika.

“Informers. By and large *khabrees* are the suspicious sorts who have had a previous criminal record. They work with the police. People like drug peddlers, pick-pockets, those involved in black marketing of cinema tickets. Then there are those who may not have a criminal record.

Prostitutes and bar dancers or transvestites involved in flesh trade. These people have more insider information than anybody else. A *khabree* can give vital leads to a reporter as well as a police officer,” informed Ashu.

“Ashu can you introduce me to one?” Ritika was excited.

“I don’t know any” said Ashu and added, “it is best you stay away from them. It takes time to cultivate these people. For now, it’s best to rely on senior reporters.”

And then Ritika remembered what Sulochana had told her the previous day -how women crime reporters got their primary information from male journalists.

Ritika mused out loud, “Testosterone makes things easy!”

Changing the topic Ashu said, “You know who the best *khabree* is? A gangster. The kind of information he’d have, no one else would. A gangster is your best bet. But only star reporters have access to those sources. So, Miss Ritika Khanolker, if you become a star reporter-

“Not if Ashu-*when* I become a star reporter.”

There was a steely determination in her eyes. Ashu decided not to argue. *She’d learn* he thought...

And the very next day Ritika learnt her lesson.



16

She was at the Crime Branch in Kurla Police Station. Inspector Kaloti had shot the gang lord Usman Ali's dominant gunman, Mangesh Savant, in a Police Encounter.

It sent shock waves in the media as, '*Double Dholki*' Kaloti was known to owe allegiance to Usman. Now they simply assumed that he had switched sides.

As she held her mike out, Kaloti narrated the episode of how it all ensued. A story every reporter knew of. Only names of gangsters and police officers involved, the place and time of the encounter had to be frequently changed in the original news report.

Kaloti recited: he got a "tip" about Mangesh Savant's whereabouts; he and his posse of police officers went to Carter Road in Bandra in the dead of the night; they caught Mangesh Savant red-handed with 3 guns and 5 lakhs worth of counterfeit currency notes; Kaloti asked Mangesh to surrender but Mangesh started shooting the cops.

"And so," said Kaloti, "we were forced to open fire. In the altercation Mangesh Savant lost his life."

"How many policemen were injured?"

"None"

"Seems like Mangesh Savant was no great shooter after all" Ritika inferred out loud and continued, "Apart from guns and fake currency, was he carrying anything else?"

Just as Kaloti was about to reply, he flashed a toothy grin. Ritika realized that it was not at her.

As she turned around, Ashu looked up from his view-finder and smiled as well. Standing behind Ritika was a dour faced man in his early 30s. Senior crime reporter Bhaskar Menon was back from Guruvayoor.

Ignoring Ritika, Bhaskar greeted Kaloti first.

“Becoming a star eh? Giving interviews and all? Kya baat hain! C’mon now. Let’s have a smoke.”

Kaloti and Bhaskar stepped out. Watching them through the doorway, Ritika did not take her eyes off the two men.

Over kicks of nicotine, Kaloti and Bhaskar spoke in hushed tones. They seemed to have a difference in opinion. Ritika deduced that sensitive information was being exchanged. Bhaskar then spoke on his mobile for a few seconds and hung up. The two men walked back in and Bhaskar faced the camera.

“May I?” he asked Ritika for the mike. She smiled as she gave it to her senior. But he did not acknowledge her. Looking at Ashu, Bhaskar asked “Rolling?”

Ashu adjusted the focus and gave a thumbs up, “Rolling...and action.”

“26-year-old gangster Mangesh Savant died in a police encounter last night. The police have found imported revolvers, cartridges and counterfeit currency worth 5 lakhs in his red Maruti 1000, at the time of the crime. It is alleged that Mangesh Savant was a shooter with the Usman Ali gang.”

Ritika thought she had culled out the same information. Then, Bhaskar added:

“According to sources, gang lord Usman Ali and Mangesh Savant were at logger heads. This is because Mangesh Savant had started to deal in mass explosives sourced from foreign shores, something, which, sources claim, Usman Ali did not approve off. And they also say, Usman Ali does not approve of counterfeit. It could be concluded that the criminal was on his way to becoming a terrorist and was nipped in the bud, in a skirmish with the Mumbai Police. This is Bhaskar Menon reporting for City News.”

Giving the mike back to Ritika he ordered “edit the story and put it up for the evening bulletin.”

And then, shaking hands with Kaloti, Bhaskar breezed out just as quickly as he had entered.

Ritika was in deep thought as she quietly labeled the DV tape. Noting date, time, name of the story, cameraman, and reporters— she filled in all the details meticulously. Kaloti got back on his chair and clicked the mouse of his computer screen. Ashu dismantled his camera and tripod, and zipped his bag shut. Strapping it on one shoulder, he said to Ritika, “let’s go.”

Ritika then, walked over to Kaloti and said softly, “thank you for your time sir.” Kaloti looked up and bobbed his head. The feistiness he had seen in her, before Bhasker came in, was missing.

In the Maruti van, Ritika was quiet. Ashu could understand. After all, he surmised, it was her story and a senior reporter had stolen the show. But these things happened all the time.

“Ritika, don’t feel bad... you are still an intern and Bhaskar has the upper hand so-

“I know that. It’s all right.”

“Then why are you this quiet?”

“What is bothering me is that why did Kaloti withhold such vital information from me regarding Mangesh Savant’s involvement in bombs and explosives.”

Ashu realized that he had got her wrong! She was not worried about not receiving any credit for the story, rather she was worried about not having access to information.

And that’s when Ashutosh Nagpal took it upon himself, to tell her all that he had learnt in five years of being a news cameraman.

On their way back to office and over coffee breaks, Ashu enlightened Ritika:

Kaloti did not tell Ritika because he shared no rapport with her. On the other hand, he and Bhaskar had started out and grown in their respective professions together.

A rumor was circulating that Mangesh Savant’s whereabouts were tipped off by Usman Ali himself. Usman had to get rid of Mangesh because apparently the latter was growing too big for his boots, taking decisions on his own, disregarding his boss.

“Hierarchy in the mafia is more serious than it is in patriarchy” said Ashu, as he sipped the machine-made coffee in office.

“What about counterfeit notes?” asked Ritika as she pressed a button on the coffee-maker.

“Usman is a big player in counterfeit. They say that’s his prime activity.”

Ashu went onto explain how senior reporters like Bhaskar got their information from other sources like *khabrees*, police officers and sometimes even politicians.

However, to avoid ruffling feathers, Ashu withheld information too. He did not tell Ritika that there were rumours that Bhaskar was on Usman’s pay-roll. And that is why Bhasker made it a point to mention that Usman did not approve of counterfeit, in his piece-to-camera.

Ashu then went on to explain that though crime reporting seemed adventurous, it really was not. Manipulations ran deep, loyalties were switched without a conscience and the entire nexus of the so called ‘system’ and crime was unholy. Which is why he never interfered with crime reporters. He did what he was told to do, making sure he shot well and recorded clearly. He never made in-roads or strategic friendships in the field.

“After all,” concluded Ashu, “This business is dirty.”

“Show me, Ashu, one business that is clean?”



17

The next evening Bhaskar ordered an “Antiquity large” for himself and asked Ritika what she’d like to drink. Ritika ordered a Pepsi. They were sitting in Ratna Palace, a smoky liquor bar in the heart of Matunga.

The bar had functional steel tables and hard-cushioned steel benches. Above the cash counter was an oversized elaborate *mandir* covered with flashing red-blue-green and yellow tea-lights. Many men, lower and middle rung executives, had a drink or two after work here. Then they boarded the last train to Virar or Kasara and other far flung suburbs of the island city. Ritika happened to be the only woman in the bar. But that did not bother the go-getter. She was out to make her way up in crime reporting and nothing was going to deter her from her goal. She was now waiting to meet a *khabree*.

Earlier that morning Ritika had worn a well-cut black *kurti*, teamed it with a pair of cigarette pants and sprayed a generous swirl of Nike deodorant. She wore pearl tops in her ears, a messenger sling across her shoulder, and to finish the look, sharp black pumps. Looking at her reflection in the mirror Ritika resolved to find herself a mentor in Bhaskar Menon.

As she entered City-News office she put on her best ‘sales executive’ smile and introduced herself to Bhaskar. On his guard, Bhaskar was professional, but not friendly. Not giving a damn about Bhaskar’s reticence, Ritika rattled all the knowledge she had about crime reporting, national politics and international affairs through the day.

She even made sure she sat with Bhaskar for lunch. On his part, Bhaskar enjoyed the attention from the pretty young woman till Ritika popped the question. "Bhaskar, you are such a star! I'd be highly obliged if you could introduce me to any one source." And that's when Bhaskar's guard came off and he smiled. For now, he knew what the razzmatazz was all about. He shrugged, "sure, are you free this evening?"

Now, it was 8 in the evening. Bhaskar and Ritika were waiting for someone called Raju Sumdi. A colloquial word, '*Sumdi*' means smooth. He was a drug peddler who doubled up as a *khabree*. The waiter got their drinks. Bhaskar added a large volume of soda and topped his glass with water. He asked the waiter to add two cubes of ice.

Coming from a conservative Maharashtrian family, Ritika was not exposed to alcohol. Her father did not drink nor did he smoke. But something about how Bhaskar looked on while the waiter plonked ice-cubes in his whiskey, was gauche. Then Bhaskar did something strange. He dipped his index finger in the blend and pulling it out, struck the droplets of liquid with his thumb.

"For the spirits who have passed way," he sniggered.

Ritika chose to ignore it and instead focus on asking the informer relevant and intelligent questions. She'd have to warm up the conversation as hitting the bulls eye might irk her senior, she thought. Meanwhile, Bhaskar gulped his drink down to almost half.

"Sir you are very kind."

"These things are a part of our job. Sometimes I give you leads, there may be a time when you give me a lead or two?"

"Me?!"

"You never know who, what, when, where or how a reporter catapults to stardom!"

"Like you."

"And don't tell anyone about your leads. A reporter must protect the identity of her informer. Never reveal your sources and never show off," instructed Bhaskar.

Ritika nodded. And then she cringed as a whiff of stench gushed in. She looked up. A lanky man with a thin beard, unkempt hair and blood

shot eyes was stooping over their table. Inebriated, he was reeking of a mish mash of country liquor and marijuana.

Bhaskar got up and shook hands “Raja Sumdi this is Ritika Khanolker. An intern with my news channel.”

Raja put his hand out and despite her will, Ritika shook hands with him. Cold and limp, Ritika let go off his hands as quickly as possible.

“Raja knows the streets like the back of his hand,” said Bhaskar patting the man on his shoulder. The two men took a seat. Bhaskar continued, “Just call Raja for any information.”

“Or for any – substance – *charas*, ganja, cocaine,” said Raja staring at Ritika’s breasts. Ritika squirmed in her seat. Bhaskar swallowed another large gulp and finished his whiskey. Then on the table he put 3 notes of 100 rupees and announced, “I have to go. You two can continue.”

Ritika was taken aback. “Sir?”

Bhaskar smiled. “You wanted to meet *khabrees* right? Good Luck.” Saying this he left.

Raja did not bother to say bye. He kept staring at her breasts. Ritika wished she had worn a *dupatta*. The stench was getting unbearable. Ritika took a deep breath and asked, “Sir, is there any information you have?”

“Huh?” he grunted still ogling at her twin-set. Ritika looked around her. Customers in the bar were now gazing at her. Raja did not take his eyes off. The smoky bar mixed with Raja’s filthy odour was nauseating. But she decided to put it all away and focus on information.

However, an occult force made her get up and walk away.



When *Aai* opened the door, she pinched her nostrils. “You are stinking! What have you been up to?” she asked her daughter. Ignoring her mother Ritika walked towards the bathroom.

Her father stood up from his TV serial. “She looks unwell,” he said to *Aai*. When Ritika shut the door, *Aai* whispered, “*Aaho*...she is smelling of cigarettes and alcohol.”

Inside the bathroom, Ritika threw up. It was not the odour of the bar, or that of the *khabree*, but it was the stench of Bhaskar’s cruel joke that had made her sick.

Ritika brushed her teeth and took a cold shower. As she wrapped her body with a thick towel she felt a surge of strength stream in. Somehow, despite her initial debacle, she knew she was going to make it big. Very soon.

However, she did not know that it would be as soon as the very next day.

Just as she did not know of a gangster-about-town who was seeking her; a gangster who needed her more than she needed him.

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| 8

At 9:00 am the next morning, Ritika settled into her seat with her second cup of coffee from the vending machine. There were two piles of newspapers and magazines stacked in front of her. One was neatly folded while the other was slightly messy. Ritika picked up India Today from the neatly folded pile and began leafing through.

Involuntarily she picked a pencil from her table and stuck it in her loosely tied bun. She had been going through news content for an hour now. Clocking in two hours before schedule would give her ample time to get information from other networks. That way she'd get a head start to the day as she would not have to wait for or share newspapers with other reporters, she had deduced.

After a while City-News staff trickled in. Then, Agastya Sen Gupta strolled past with another man around his age. They were plunged headlong in conversation. Ritika went back to her magazine. Much later, when Ritika looked up she saw the friendly receptionist, Glenda Rego as she sauntered in with a great big smile. Keeping India Today on the messy pile, Ritika unfolded India's premier newspaper Times of the Nation. That's when she saw Bhaskar enter. She looked away. Bhaskar ignored Ritika just as well and switched on the CPU of his computer.

She felt rage. She was fuming, and miserable and humiliated all at once. She was livid and confused not knowing whether she should keep quiet or confront Bhaskar. And just then her eyes fell on the front-page

headlines of Times of the Nation. **A.T Claims Innocence** by Nagarajan Iyer.

That was it. Ritika forgot about Bhaskar. As she went through the half page article, a single thought hammered through *“he is speaking to the press, he is speaking to the press, he is speaking..”*

Ritika got up yet again for her third cup of coffee, this time with the newspaper in hand. As she re-read the A.T article she removed the pencil she had stuck in her hair and circled Nagarajan Iyer’s name.

“Is that Naga’s article you are reading?”

Ritika looked up. It was Agastya Sengupta with the man she had seen earlier. Absent minded, Sengupta introduced “Naga meet Ritika, Ritika - Naga. Intern-editor,” he said pointing at the two casually. He then proceeded to the coffee vending machine to get 2 cups of coffee, one for himself and the other for Naga, short for Nagarajan Iyer, and Editor-In-Chief, Times of the Nation.

She could not believe the co-incidence! Ritika took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. Unintentionally, she glanced at the article and then looking up at Sengupta she said, “Sir I want to interview A.T for City-News. An exclusive, –one-on-one.”

Sengupta looked up from his coffee. “You need to ask Naga, I have no leads whatsoever.”

Ritika turned to face Naga and smiled, “Sir, I’d like to interview A.T.”

“Go ahead. I can’t stop you. I am not your boss,” said Naga cheekily.

“I need his number from you sir.” Ritika knew that she had to get thick skinned.

“Sure. Lets speak in Agastya’s cabin.”

Seconds later, in her chief’s cabin, Nagarajan Iyer dialled a number. Ritika could feel her throat dry out. All she hoped was A.T would agree for an interview. Even if he said no, Ritika knew that she had tried atleast. *“It has been 3 hours since the news is out and no senior reporter from City-News has asked for it. I hope Sengupta registers that atleast,”* thought Ritika.

“Hello. Morning. There is a reporter from City News, Ritika Khanolker, she’d like to speak to you.”

On the other line as he spoke to Naga, A.T had a smile on his face. Ritika too had a hint of a smile. After all the Editor-In-Chief of Times of The Nation knew her name. Just then Naga gave her the phone, "A.T".

"Now??" she whispered softly.

"No. Next Monday. It is the first day of the holy month of Shravan."

Ritika braced herself as she took the phone. She looked at Sengupta. He blinked his eyes, softly assuring her.

"Hello?"

"Ritika Khanolker. A.T here. What can I do for you Madam?"

"Sir, I'd like to interview you for my channel"

"Sure"

"When?"

"Tomorrow? Does tomorrow morning suit you Madam?"

Ritika could not stop smiling. She had managed to bag her first TV interview with a gangster who was in the headlines.



An interview is not merely a series of questions. It is a chance to get into the mind of the person in the hot seat. The potential of an interviewee lying is high, but with precise questions and careful observation a reporter has the power to glimpse into his soul.

That's what Ritika wanted: to get into the mysterious mind of a good-looking gangster. '*A.T would make great Television content!*' thought Ritika.

Ritika had no shoot or edit lined up for the day. She went to the reception and while writing in the muster, mentioned to Glenda Rego that she'd be out all day.

"Where do I say you are, if someone asks for you?"

"CED"

Situated behind the Taj Mahal Hotel, CED, short for Center of Education and Documentation was a powerhouse of information. Many researchers, students, professors and reporters flocked to this watering hole in search of knowledge. Back in 1999, it was a primary source of research as information could not be 'googled'.

Since A.T had come into limelight only over the past month, there was nothing she did not know about him. Now, at CED, Ritika read up on Mumbai mafia of times bygone. From newspaper reports over the years she gathered that Khalif Ahmed and Usman Ali grew up in the by-lanes of Mahim. Around the same age, they fought as children and later even as teenagers. Khalif had made a dramatic escape to Dubai from Mahim Creek while Usman continued to hold forth on the shores of Mahim.

As Ritika took notes at the back of her mind she pondered over the hook of her interview. What could she ask him? What questions would give her fascinating insights from A.T? She now had access to a 'source' many senior reporters would vie for. She'd have to be tactful with him.

At night she could not sleep, for she had yet to come up with 10 smart questions. She got out of bed and opened her cupboard. Ironing her favorite *Kurti* and jeans, putting them on her hanger, setting out her sandals, de-cluttering her wallet and knapsack- the mundane tasks of preparing for the next morning emptied her mind.

Suddenly Ritika found herself writing – Mr. A.T you claim that you are innocent, and then what exactly is your profession? Are you a part of the underworld? What is your understanding of it? And what, then, is the greatest crime?

She jotted the questions that came to her mind. She edited, rephrased and revised them until she was satisfied with what she had. The ten questions that would help her pick his brains. And then, finally around 3:00 A.M Ritika fell off to sleep. It was a disturbed sleep packed with surreal images of grey blood, black guns, crows flying asunder, distant sounds of gunshots and a shapeless organ that pumped...just like a heart.



19

Six hours later, Ritika Khanolker was in A.T's swanky apartment. She looked around, as Ashu set up the interview frame.

Ritika was impressed by the sleek colour scheme of the apartment. *'He has great taste. I must compliment him. Or maybe not. I should just be professional.'*

She was surprised at herself because despite being amidst gangsters she was composed, confident and not intimidated in this house. She could not explain it, but in this house, she felt safe. There were no bad vibes that one would presumably sense in a gangster's pad.

A.T had not appeared yet. The men she had seen at the Sessions Court were in the terrace talking. There was an elderly man too. Barring one of them, Munawar, the other two looked nothing like gangsters she had seen in Bollywood films. They appeared so regular that if she had seen them at a station or a bus-stop, she'd not give them a second glance.

And just as she was debating whether or not to compliment him for his tastefully done up flat, Ashu moved the slim Satchler light to the left of camera and announced, "Ready to roll."

Ritika got up and looked at the three men. It was the elderly man, Mistry, who glanced back. Ritika nodded, indicating they were ready. The puny man, Hakim, then walked into the apartment and walked across to A.T's bedroom. A second later, cool and composed, A.T glided in.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Ritika out loud. A.T was taken aback, but did not show any emotion. The three men were on their guard.

"Sorry, my fault," stated Ritika at the outset. "I should have told you... but what you are wearing just does not work. Red bleeds on camera. You need to change your shirt!"

“Would you like to help me select?” asked A.T poker face.

“A blue, a light blue shirt would perfectly compliment your grey and white interiors,” said Ritika with a smile. A.T did not smile back. He gave a slight nod and went back to his room. He was impressed with her aplomb.



When A.T came back to the room, Ritika and Ashu got up from the sofa. A.T took a seat in front of the camera and looked on. As Ashu attached the lapel mike, Ritika took a seat next to the camera.

Their eyes met.

Both looked away, trying to avoid each other’s gaze. Ashu came back and looked into the viewfinder. A.T looked straight into camera. Ashu focused on his piercing eyes, then chiseled cheekbones. Ashu then zoomed out to reveal a sharp jawline on a face that made A.T look like an angel. As he adjusted the focus on a mid-close he said, “Mr. A.T can you say something for sound check please.”

“Madam? Do you like the way I look now?” Ritika bit her lips and nodded. It was however, a failed attempt for she could not stop blushing. Thankfully Ashu snapped her out of it by saying.

“Perfect! Ritika we are ready to roll.”

And intern, Ritika Khanolker started her first exclusive interview with gangster, A.T. On his part, A.T was at ease. She noticed his eyes. They had a certain meditative quality about them. At times he was philosophical; there were moments when he was witty and sometimes, just occasionally, he gave Ritika a glimpse into his soul.



‘It was time for her last question.

Ritika: Mr. Pradhan what according to you is the greatest crime?

A.T: Waste of time. There is no greater crime than the waste of precious time. I am extremely mindful of my mine. Even when I am thinking of something – at the back of the mind I always ask ‘does this thought serve me well? What purpose does it achieve?’ When I meet people, I ask myself – is he wasting my time or am I wasting his. And if I think either of us is, I cut the conversation short.

Saying this A.T stopped. He continued to stare at Ritika. She looked transfixed into his eyes. Ashu looked away from the screen of his DV camera to Ritika – waiting for her to say “Cut”. Sitting on the bar stool, Mistry typed something on his big fat mobile. Hakim was motionless and looked respectfully at A.T. Standing ill- at- ease was Munawar whose suspicious eyes darted from A.T to Ritika to Ashu.

It was very quiet. The silence made everyone restless. Other than A.T and Ritika of course. Ashu leaned to the side and tapped lightly on her shoulder. Shaken out of her trance, Ritika looked around quickly and said “Yes? Oh... Cut!”

She darted a quick glance at A.T. He sat still, looking at Ritika, the twinkle in his eyes more evident now. Getting conscious, Ritika looked down at her questionnaire. In an attempt at portraying everything was cool, she studied the sheet of paper on her lap. She let a couple of seconds pass before she looked up at A.T again.

He was no longer sitting there. He was on his terrace talking on the phone. A.T had moved so stealthily, that she had not even realized. She studied his walk. Slow and lethal, it reminded her of the tiger she had spotted in the jungles of Bandhavgarh.

Ashu removed the tape from the camera and gave it to Ritika. As Ritika started to label the tape, from his terrace, A.T looked at her. Young, attractive and vulnerable –A.T could not help but smile. Feeling his gaze on her, she looked up, but this time A.T was punching the digits of his mobile with his thumb.

When A.T looked her way yet again, she was inserting the tape into its cover. As Ritika put the tape into her bag, she looked at A.T. This time he was on the phone. To the on-lookers it was almost like a game. A game that was being master-minded. But, in the moment, one could not be sure who the instigator was.

Ashu strapped the camera bag on his shoulder and looked at Ritika. They were ready to leave. Bracing herself she walked to the terrace. It was time to say good bye. As she approached A.T, Munawar stood in her way. Blocking her path, he declared “*Sir is bijhy.*”

“Munawar,” said A.T calmly. Though he was on the call he signaled to let Ritika through. Munawar stepped aside, still staring at Ritika. Not the one to cower under his gaze, Ritika glanced back at him as she walked past. And flashed an obligatory smile when she approached A.T. She wanted to come across, as professional as possible. Though Ritika and A.T exchanged just courtesies and phone numbers, the chemistry between

the two was palpable. Ritika did not want to leave. In fact she would have loved to be left alone with him. But there was nothing more left to say.

She was quiet in the lift. Ashu stared at her. When she looked up at him he stated, "you can't be falling for those you interview, you know. Everyone in the room saw you blush."

Flushed from embarrassment Ritika cupped her face.

From the 10th floor of his terrace apartment A.T watched Ritika as she got into her media van. His eyes followed the van till it went out of sight. There was something very special about Ritika and yes, she had fallen for him.

As he thought of what he was going to do with her next, his phone rang.

It was Naga calling to ask how A.T's first television interview was. A.T knew the 'real' reason for Naga's call. What was bothering this senior journalist was that why had A.T chosen an intern from a local news channel. If he wanted, A.T could have had a senior reporter from a national television network interview him. What surprised Naga further was A.T's presumption that Ritika would bite the bait after reading Naga's interview.

"How did you know that after reading my article she would ask me for your number?"

"We keep tab of the news too Sir."

"It could have also been because you asked me to go to the City-News office that very morning. You made it too easy for her."

"No. I just made things move quickly for me," said A.T.

Naga paused for he tried to put the statement in perspective. On his part, A.T hung up. He did not want to explain how he had made the process faster by asking Naga to go to the City-News office. Ritika would have tried to get through to Naga, but knowing Naga he would have made Ritika wait for a day or two. A.T was never the sorts to fall for bureaucracy and red-tape.

After all, there is no greater crime than the waste of time.

Logging, is a process in which an interview is written out on paper. This helps a reporter to choose the best bits to put on-air.

In the cramped edit room of City-News, Ritika Khanolker logged the A.T interview. She pressed pause and rewound the footage on the Avid machine. And all along, Ritika kept glancing at her mobile. She hoped to hear from A.T, though she knew there was no reason for him to call. She wanted to hear his voice. *But what would she say to him?*

Ritika got up when Sengupta walked in. He asked her to show a portion of the interview. Placing her palm on the mouse of the Avid, Ritika scrolled the footage to her favorite sound-bite:

Ritika: So, you are saying you are not from the mafia?

A.T: No, I am not from the underworld. I am a professional shooter and an amateur home chef at best. I was wrongly implicated and the court has set me free. However, though, I don't belong to that world I understand it. Yes, it's illegal, but, yet, it is business nonetheless. Car, telephones and computers are legitimate businesses. The underworld has transactions in gambling dens, narcotics, real estate and film finance. It is a diversified venture so to speak. Like any other organized business, crime syndicates too have departments, heads of departments, and executives. Every job profile is based on specialization of labour. Like any other organization no one is a friend or a foe and tables could turn anytime. There is just one difference however. In corporations the enemy is diffused by dirty politics. Here it is a matter of simply pulling the trigger.

Ritika pressed pause and looked at Sengupta. Staring at the screen he smiled. "Great job Ritika. Make sure you edit right away because I am putting this up on the evening bulletin. Show me the final cut before it goes on- air. Tonight, I will launch it on prime time and tomorrow we shall air this all day." Saying this he walked off.

Ritika smiled and instantly grabbed the phone. For now, she had a valid reason to speak to A.T. Dialing his number she walked out of the edit suite.

"Hello"

"Yes Ritika?"

"Sir... Your interview will be aired tonight on the 9 'o' clock news."

"How did you find me?"

"Excuse me?"

"How do I look in the interview Ritika?"

"My boss thought very highly of the sound bites you gave. You speak very well Mr. A.T. Good-bye."

Ritika hung up and smiled. She did not gush and go on and on about how cool he was or how she could not take her eyes off him.

It was time she learnt the rules of the game.



Both Ritika and A.T, professionals in their respective fields, buckled down to work. While Ritika edited the interview, in Mistry's grubby flat in Taikalwadi, A.T was making plans on how to train fresh recruits.

A.T instructed Munawar and Hakim about the paraphernalia he would need for his 'workshop'. As he spoke, he avoided looking at Mistry. The sickly -sweet smell of vapor-rub and the sight of his steam inhalation on Mistry's tottering dining table was simply gross.

Covering his head with a thin cotton *pancha*, Babban Mistry hung low, inhaling steam from an oversize aluminum pot. For some reason, Mistry filled it up with almost 3 liters of water. The pot was so large that if Mistry wanted to, he could dunk his head in it.

As A.T spoke about the place and the training set up, Mistry looked up from the pot and said, “Train them as well as you wish. But everybody is not A.T. I still can’t get over how you pulled off the Lalit Apte shoot.”

A.T sharply turned to Mistry. *Why the hell did Mistry have to give that out!* Dripping with sweat, his face was pink like prawn. Unperturbed Mistry covered his head yet again. In the moment A.T wanted to dunk his head in the boiling water and wring the *pancha* around his neck.

Mistry looked up again. “It was the planning, precision and execution that probably made you Boss’ blue eyed boy. Lalit Apte’s contract was by far the best I have seen. You should tell these boys. After all, we are inner circle,” said Mistry.

Now that was too much information!

And against his will, thanks to Babban Mistry, A.T had to narrate a tale he did not want to tell...



9th Feb 1999
Ramabai Chawl
Lower Parel
Mumbai

He was thoroughly amused as he watched a home- shopping television commercial for '**Flab Cutter**'. A woman of Chinese origin displayed a tiny machine that promised to cut flab out of the human body. Then, distraught Caucasian models exposed their flabby arms and stomachs. The Chinese woman explained how rolling the machine for just 2 minutes every day would melt the flab in 2 weeks! Landline numbers kept flashing on screen goading viewers to '**order now**'.

Do people really buy this nonsense? He thought as he took a sip of his whiskey. Just then his Motorola beeped. There was a message in the inbox. Vote for Lalit Apte.

A prominent MLA, Lalit Apte was not new to assassination attempts. There were rumours that he had played a key role in the communal riots of 1992-1993. The well networked MLA had survived four assassination attempts made by the underworld. And that was because he was heavily guarded at all times. He had a Y-security cover comprising 11 policemen during the day. Even when he slept he had the privilege of X-security: 2 policemen at his door while he slept. Ensconced in a heavy protection it had been difficult to shoot the MLA dead.

But that was also because the underworld had untrained ruffians who could effectively use firearms only from a point-blank range. A.T was a marksman, a rifle shooter and a mountaineer who had trained with the NMS, National Military Scouts since his school days. This time Lalit Apte was going to be targeted by a professional.

A.T made a quick deduction about Apte. He was least secure when he was at home and thus he would have to die in his house. Thus A.T's first job would be to find the address. *Did Apte avail the MLA Hostel accommodation or did he have his own home in the city?*

Now, the Chinese woman on the TV screen distracted his stream of thoughts. Just as he was about to switch the TV off, he stared at the screen.

Minutes later he ordered for 20 units of Flab Cutter.



After two days of inquiry, on the third, A.T got off BEST Bus. No 201. Sai Kripa Housing Colony was located in the corner of a congested junction. Lalit Apte owned a flat in the expansive housing colony. There was an Irani Café on the pavement opposite the estate. The colony was made up of 5 floor buildings. The balconies of a batch of buildings overlooked the main road.

A.T studied the colony structure for a week. He came to the spot at different times of the day and hung around for less than 20 minutes. He did not want to attract attention. Each time he came, he either changed his clothes or hair style. Sometimes he sported a full beard, sometimes a goatee and sometimes just a moustache. He was in jeans, T-Shirt and knapsack sometimes. Then deliberately he made grave fashion faux pas of teaming his T-shirt with trousers and trainers. The idea was to melt in the milieu.

Sai Kripa C.H.S was made up of many buildings, all attached to one another. A common terrace ran along connecting all the buildings together. There was one constable armed with a stick standing at the gates.

In 1999, most housing societies in Mumbai did not have building security. At best, there'd be an untrained watchman who'd double up as a handyman for the building. Mumbai was a safe city and thefts were few, practically unheard off. Because of Lalit Apte however, Sai Kripa had token constables stationed 24/7. Most of them pot-bellied and middle aged.

Two days later, A.T was at the gate of the colony with a bouquet and a box of *mithai*. The constable on-duty was awake this time. In fluent English, he confidently asked for MLA Apte's flat number. "I am from

Elpi Advertising and my boss wanted to give his wedding card to Apte Saheb.”

Much to his surprise the constable said, “*Apte Saheb, vartee J-3 madhye.* But Saheb not at home.” Sans emotion A.T gave the parcel and walked away. The constable had made him a happy man. For the balcony of flat J-3 overlooked the main road. Over the next few days, A.T kept staring at the 2nd floor flat from the Irani Café. But no one looked out the black bullet proof windows.

The next evening, amidst a volley of police jeeps a white Ambassador, roared into the colony premises. Lalit Apte was home. But A.T was not ready. Not just yet.

He continued to keep a watch on the politician’s entry and exit schedules in Sai Kripa C.H.S.

And on the day, he received his package of 20 units – A.T entered Sai Kripa posing as a door-to-door salesman for Flab Cutter.

He started with Block A and doubled up the stairs making note of the surnames. One of the first housing colonies of Mumbai, Sai Kripa had no lifts. He made a mental note of surnames as he went up. Once on top, he walked across the terrace. As he passed the entrance doors of each building, in his mind he labeled them in alphabetical order - B, C, D.

When he reached the H-Block he walked down to flat H-6 and rang the bell.

Flab Cutter opened doors, hearts, wallets and even tongues. And for those women who were hesitant at first, A.T referred to ‘clients’ from A-Block. Women sang to the bearded salesman!

A.T sifted through the chit chat for information that was relevant to him.

Lalit Apte, apparently lived by himself. His wife and children were packed off to Ratnagiri, his native place in Konkan after the first assassination attempt. Point No. 1. Tick.

Another housewife said how she was proud to be married into Sai Kripa. For most of the men were professionals. “We are all wives of doctors, lawyers, pilots, engineers, chartered accountants, professors... oh no no,” she corrected herself, “the professor does not have a wife.”

“Oh, then I should not go to that flat. Which flat is that?” A.T wanted to cull as much as possible.

“Next building J-5. The one above Apte Saheb’s.” A.T’s ears perked. He could not believe his luck. Point No. 2. Tick.

“Thanks for letting me know. You saved me a trip. It gets very hard lugging this box.”

The woman smiled and then as an after- thought said, “Actually you could go there. During the day there is a nurse. She has been in the family for ten years now.”

“But you said the professor did not have a wife.”

“Father. He has a father. Poor man has been suffering from advanced stage of Alzheimer’s. Mallamma has been nursing him 6 days a week. She comes, then the professor leaves for university and when the professor comes, she leaves...It’s very sad, you know.”

Not for A.T. He needed an entry into that very flat in order to kill Lalit Apte. Point No. 3. Double Tick.

Steeled with information so generously bestowed by talkative housewives, A.T strutted down H-Block and walked into J. *My heart will go on*; the Original Soundtrack of the Hollywood blockbuster Titanic hit was blaring out of J-1. Calmly he walked up the steps. His pace slowed down as J-3, Lalit Apte’s flat came into view. There was a constable stationed outside the door. Seated on a chair he lazily put a match stick in his ear, and twirled it around slowly. Then removing it, he looked at the match stick and wiped it on his uniform.

Acknowledging the constable with a nod, A.T walked up and rang the bell to J-5. **Dr. N.J Hegde (Ph.D. Economics)** was inscribed on the name plate. Also inscribed in tiny fonts was **Out**. There was a square piece of plastic that covered **In**.

Which meant that every time the professor came home, he slid the plastic square to cover **Out** and thereby indicated that he was at home.

Why would people give so much information about themselves, thought A.T as he rang the bell.

When a stout nurse answered the door, A.T smiled. He knew that he would not need to do much to convince her to buy Flab Cutter. A.T spoke about all the homes he had been to and how everyone had loved the

Flab Cutter. The nurse flashed a toothy grin at A.T. For 6 days a week, 8 hours a day she spoke to no one while she worked. Even at home, she lived by herself. So desperate was she for a human conversation that she allowed a stranger into her employer's house.

At first, he opened the Flab Cutter and demonstrated its use. The nurse was fascinated.

- How much?

- Rs.350/- only.

- Oh, I don't have that much on me. Can you come tomorrow? Come any time after 8:00 and before 6:00. You see...

The nurse got into a spiel of her daily routine. How she was the principle care-taker of an octogenarian who suffered from advanced Alzheimer's. How she fed him liquids, cleaned him and changed his diaper every 4 hours. About how he was bedridden and simply stared at people. That he had lost his ability to speak. All he did on his own accord was breathe.

"But at 4:00 every evening I prop him up so he can look out the window. We have a busy street so there is activity. I don't know if it makes a difference, but I do it."

"You are very kind," said A.T.

Then the nurse went on to tell him that she'd report to work on the dot of eight as the professor, the patient's son had to leave for his 8:15 local train to Churchgate. She left at 6:00 for that was when the professor got back. She mentioned how, he, the professor was never a minute late.

Point No. 4, Disciplined man. Tick. Disciplined men stuck to time and it was timeliness in men that made A.T's job easier.

"Looks like the professor is a stickler for time," said salesman A.T.

"He is regimented to another level. Don't tell anyone I told you," she said. Then leaning forward, she whispered, "At 7:30 pm sharp he has half a bottle of 'Old Monk' Rum every single evening and knocks off to sleep at the dot of 9:00."

A.T could not help but smile. He loved women. They spoke so much! As an afterthought, the nurse felt bad about divulging the Old Monk habit of her employer. So, she covered that up by singing hymns about what a good man he was. That the professor took great care of his father. He

sponged him every morning and combed the invalid's hair. That he never gave her any trouble, how he gave her an increment every year without asking for it, how he had all his meals with his father, how he spoke to his father every evening and changed-

"Excuse me," said A.T getting up. "I have to go very far."

He kept a unit of Flab Cutter. "For you. It's free. Thank-you," he said genuinely grateful for all the valuable information she had effortlessly doled out.



At ten the following night, Bus. No 201 stopped outside the Irani Café. An old man alighted from the bus. He was quickly followed by a much younger man who held the old man's hand. The two walked slowly towards Sai Kripa.

The constable on duty asked respectfully, "*Aazoba* where are you going?" The old man smiled and said that his daughter 'Srimati Patil' lived in flat A-1. "This young man is my caretaker. He will drop me, have dinner and leave in sometime. I will be staying here longer."

Without a fuss the constable let him go.

The old man and his caretaker ambled to A wing. Once inside, the two men doubled up the stairs, reached the terrace and sprinted to the entrance of J wing. While old man, A.T, changed from his *dhobi* and *kurta* into Black T-shirt and track pants, the young man caught his breath. Running up the stairs and then sprinting over 100 meters was too much exercise for Gafoor, a skillful locksmith.

Dumping his clothes in the *jhola*, A.T and Gafoor went outside. At first Gafoor inserted a blank key. He turned it back and forth and pulled it out. Then he checked for the scratch marks and started filing at the spots. A.T kept an eye on the two flats as well as the landing. Gafoor, then re-inserted the key. And repeated the process, known as 'impressioning', till the key opened the lock. Ten minutes later Gafoor left with a thick wad of currency notes and A.T heaved a sigh of relief. This was the only juncture where he and Gafoor could have been caught red-handed had someone spotted them. But he had been lucky.

Now alone inside the flat, A.T heard loud relentless snoring. Despite the darkness, A.T could find his way, as there was ample light permeating

from out. At first A.T tiptoed in the direction of the noise. He saw the semi naked podgy professor snore loudly. Next to him was a large steel jug with a tiny glass on top of the steel lid. He remembered what the nurse had said. That the disciplined professor consumed half a bottle of Old Monk every day. If he was a stickler for time, it would mean that he would wake up at fixed times to relieve himself or have a drink of water as alcohol dehydrates the body. During these two activities he would also check on his father. If he was a diligent caregiver, he'd turn his father around every two hours, to avoid bedsores – concluded A.T.

And then he entered the second bedroom. At first, he was startled. A limp man in his 80s lay with his eyes wide open. He stared at the ceiling fan. A.T had to remind himself that the old man had advanced Alzheimer's. That he had lost his ability to communicate. All that this 'scary' old man could do actively was breathe.

A.T moved in close to the patient. A.T could smell his nauseous breath. There was phlegm around the orifice. Now, holding his breath A.T closed in further. But the old man did not bat an eye lid.

So stark was the stillness, that A.T gripped the scraggy old man shook him vigorously just to be sure that he was not acting. The patient was good as dead but his eyes, they were wide open.

The room reeked of alcohol mixed with cigarettes mixed with the stench of impending death. A.T studied the bed. It was a sturdy iron bed with mechanical levers to prop the patient. There was ample room under the bed. It was a good place to hide.

A.T then looked out the balcony. He saw the junction and the Irani Café. The bustle had trickled down to a few vehicles and passersby. Minutes later the Café owner pulled down the shutter and left. It was 11:30 at the time.

Taking his knapsack, A.T rolled under the bed and waited patiently to observe at what time the professor woke up in the middle of the night. He also wanted to know the exact time the street hushed down to complete silence. Hours later when A.T got hungry, he opened his tiffin and popped a *methi laddoo*.

Other than the barking of a stray dog or a water tanker rumbling down the road, there was no remarkable activity.

At 1:10 in the night, A.T heard a distant stirring. The delicate clanking of steel indicated the professor was having water. Seconds later A.T saw footsteps swinging down the hallway to the bathroom. A.T then heard the steady stream of urine discharge into the commode. Footsteps swung towards the room and were now close to the bed. Clearly the professor was heavily drunk. In that inebriated state he shuffled his father to the side. And then, kissing his father aloud on the forehead, the professor said “*Parat yeto Baba.*” This meant that the professor would come back again.

As the footsteps left the room, A.T looked at his watch. It was 1:20 AM. A BEST bus then ambled past. *This must be the last bus...* deduced A.T as he popped another *methi laddoo*. He always carried *methi laddoos* around. *They were small, fuss-free and provided adequate nutrition especially when he had to wait for long.*

Lalit Apte’s death would have to be after 1:25 P.M. A.T deduced. Now all he had to do was wait and note when the professor woke up the second time.

After that night, A.T kept a close watch on MLA Lalit Apte’s movements. He was abreast of Marathi newspapers and broadcast bulletins aired on Doordarshan. Every weeknight he visited the house and sat staring at the comatose man. He wanted to get used to the spine-chilling sight and the stench.

Sometimes he’d sneak into the professor’s room. Inebriated on half a bottle of Old Monk every night of his life, the professor was dead to the world after 1:20 in the night. A.T usually left the house by 4:00 A.M before the crack of dawn. He’d board the first bus that roared down the road at 4:10 each morning.

2 months later, one evening, the Marathi News Anchor announced that Lalit Apte was going to be at a political rally in Nasik with his party chief, the next day.

A.T called an unsuspecting long lost ‘friend’ in Nasik. They spoke about many things. A.T said he planned to visit ‘hometown’ but did not want to travel during the rallies. In the midst of the banter he asked the friend to call him after the rally was over.

Promptly the next day around 6:30 pm, the friend informed that the rally was over. A.T could not be sure if Apte would be back home. But he had to take a chance. If Apte was on his way to Mumbai he’d be home

around midnight. Midnight was not the ideal time as the street still had a few passersby, but then, A.T had to take that risk.

On 6th May at 10:30 P.M, A.T was back in the flat. From his mountaineering haversack he removed a thick rope. Almost 50 meters in length and 13 millimeters in diameter, the long rope was capable of bearing at least 200 kilos of weight. The rope was originally white in colour, but A.T had painted it black to camouflage in the dark. Painting the rope black also hid the well-worn scratches that had ensued on account of relentless training over the years when he had rappelled down mountains, clambered walls, gone trekking to the Everest and the Annapurna base camp. He had done all of this during his training period as a cadet.

Now, A.T rolled under the iron bed and pulled out the thick rope. He tied the thick rope to the bed post. Making sure that the rope hung tight on the pulley, he walked to the balcony. He let go of the coil bit by bit until it hung just above the first floor.

He was now ready for MLA Lalit Apte. There was nothing more left to do other than to pull the trigger and he would have to wait for that opportune moment. Quietly he opened his tiffin and popped a *methi laddoo* into his mouth.

A.T's patience had been built over the years of intense training as a rifle shooter. His job involved waiting ... over hours, days and in this case over months. In these times he focused on breath and visualization. Because shooting, after all, was a mind game. The mind and body had to be in complete harmony to be able to hit bull's eye.

But there was no sign of Lalit Apte that night. There was a lull in the night. A dog barked occasionally. Minutes and soon, hours ticked away.

A.T thought it was best to abort the mission. Soon he heard the professors' footsteps. And just as he was about to deftly unlock the pulley from the bedpost, he heard a volley of cars streaming down the road. By the time he rolled out the bed and looked out, the 3 cars entered the stately gates of Sai Kripa C.H.S.

Lalit Apte had arrived.

But the professor was peeing still. A.T had to get out of the main door.

He picked his Mauser and noiselessly paced to the toilet. He peeped in to see the professor pee with his eyes shut. Gingerly A.T shut the door

and locked it from out. As he went out the hallway he heard the professor knock in panic. He then went out the main door and shut it.

From the window of the third-floor landing, he saw a four-foot eleven-inch Lalit Apte jump out the jeep. The posse of policemen saluted and left. Two of them however walked towards J-Wing escorting the MLA. One walked in front of the politician and the other behind him. In a top angle straight shot, A.T aimed for the crown.

The first head passed by and then A.T pulled the trigger. By the time Apte's head passed by, the bullet had pierced through his skull. There was a loud thud and before the police guards could react, A.T noiselessly opened the door of J-5 and shut it. Inside the professor was banging the door loudly!

“Aye! Aye! Open the door! Aye who is it? Open the door!”

Ignoring him A.T paced to the patient's room. The old man's eyes were open. A.T threw the black rope down and clambered down the building speedily.

When he reached the first floor, he jumped down the road and started to walk. Luck was by his side, as the first BEST No 201-ambled past Irani restaurant at 4:10 that Monday morning.

A.T got on the bus and walked to the conductor to buy a ticket. As the bus gathered speed, from the corner of his eye he saw a constable run out. From the other side of the road 2 police jeeps zipped across. He looked back at Sai Kripa as it diminished from his view. Randomly, various flats were lighting up.

3 hours later on The Morning Bulletin, A.T got to know that Lalit Apte had been shot in the crown. In the bulletin at 6:00p.m, it was reported that Professor Dr. N. J. Hegde and the nurse were taken in for questioning as a rope was found tied to his father's bed.



Known as 3 Cs - Cinema, Cricket and Crime are the three popular beats of mainstream news reporting. News of A.T's interview on-air spread like wild fire! From journalists, police officers, politicians, film producers, actors, builders, corporate professionals, to the common man – that prime time, everyone switched from India-Sri Lanka One Day International to a hitherto unknown cable network, City News.

On-air Agastya Sengupta announced how City News was Mumbai's very own news network and its reporters knew the city at the grass roots...

"...City News reporter Ritika Khanolker has got alleged shooter A.T on camera. Who is A.T? Why has he created such a furor? Was he really planning to kill Virendra Saxena? Or was he simply, practicing long range shooting? The quintessential case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Who is this unknown entity who has suddenly hurled himself into the limelight? Take a look ...

At home, in the far-flung suburb of Mira Road, Bhasker stared hard at the TV screen. *How did Ritika manage to get this one? Why had Sengupta not put him on the job? Who was Ritika's khabree...*

Watching the news with her colleagues at the Press Club, Sulochana Sharma also wondered how an intern had got someone as big as A.T. "I have met the reporter! I have met her! She was piling onto me at Sessions Court. That time she knew nothing. I taught her a few tricks and look what she managed!" announced Sulochana to her colleagues.

Smoking weed in his timber mart, gangster Usman Ali was jealous. After all A.T was young, good-long and most importantly, sophisticated. Usman Ali and his boys lacked the finesse that money could never buy. Seated next to him, Inspector Kaloti shook his head “young boys just want fame. He is no match to you Bhai.”

In a stinking dimly lit interrogation room, his loyal constable whispered in ACP Pathak’s ear that A.T was on-air. The terror suspect who Pathak was questioning got a breather and caught up with sleep that was deprived for days on end.

This time there were no guests at home as Ritika’s parents watched the gangster speak. Should they be proud of their daughter or worry for her, they did not know how to react. Seated beside them, Ritika had an impish smile as A.T espoused his world view.

In a nondescript hideout in Byculla, Mistry nodded in disapproval, “a bigger news network would have been better ...I wonder why you chose a local start-up like City-News?”

A.T did not reply and continued to stare at the screen. He was thinking of the next step. Seconds later Mistry nudged the mobile into his well-cut bicep and said “Boss”.

A.T took the call.

“Mistry has been quietly doing his job for the last 30 years. Not once was he in the limelight. Why are you attracting attention?”

“You have to trust me. This is the first step to oust Usman.”

There was silence on the other end. Mistry, Munawar and Hakim looked up from the TV screen. Boss Khalif then asked A.T about the game plan.

“Give me time and I give you my word. A month from now there will be no Usman. And there will be no accusations on you. You have to trust me. Or else Mistry can go back to heading the gang.”

Taking a deep breath, Boss hung up. And A.T buckled down to a day-by-day, month long strategy to eliminate Usman Ali.



She would rather be stranded in the infamous Mumbai floods, report live from a communal riot or be in the thick of a terror ambush – but

weddings unnerved Ritika Khanolker. Days later, one evening Ritika was at one such fanfare, feeling awkward in a black chiffon saree, fine gold accessories and a thick jasmine *gajra* that her mother had coaxed her to wear.

The bride and groom were on stage. Guests were queuing up to wish the newly-weds. Last in the line were the Khanolkers'. Soon they were joined by another bespectacled lady in her mid-50s. Mrs. Khanolker exclaimed, "*Aiyaa! Baby Tai!*"

She then plunged into an animated conversation with Baby Tai during the course of which she found out that Baby Tai's son was working in Australia. Ritika and her father exchanged looks.

"My Ritika is a TV star! She is a big reporter you know?"

Baby *Tai* nodded as she checked Ritika out. Wanting to impress Baby *Tai* further, Mrs. Khanolker lied, "I have also taught her how to make *chapattis* and *sol kadi*."

Ritika darted a glance at her mother.

"Even I taught my Nikhil, how to boil eggs and fill water. I made him self-sufficient before he left. Who knows what kind of a girl he will find? Girls these days are very *career* oriented."

She meant to say career-oriented. Ritika had had enough. She quickly excused herself and moved away. Dialing a number from her mobile, she whispered, "Hi Ashu. Do me a favour please? Call me back as soon as I hang up now. Say I have been called to office by Sengupta. That I need to urgently report to him. Thanks."

Saying this Ritika hung up and rejoined the group. The next moment, her phone rang and smiling sweetly at her mother Ritika turned to take the call. However, she deliberately remained within earshot.

"Hello?"

"Hi Ritika"

It was A.T. Taken by surprise, Ritika looked back at her parents and walked away from the spot.

"Are you busy? Is this a good time to talk?"

"I am so glad you called Mr. A.T."

"A.T. Let's keep it A.T. I called to say thank you. It was a great interview.

“I simply did my job.”

“I owe you one. Tell me? How can I help you?”

“Get me out of here please!”

“Where are you?”

“At a wedding.”

“Getting married?”

“You bet!”

“Let me rescue you. Come Ritika. Come home. I am alone.”

Ritika stopped smiling. She glanced at her watch. It was 8:45 pm, late to fix any meeting. She then saw her mother gossip with Baby *Tai*, while keeping an eye on her. Their eyes met and with a slight nod *Aai* beckoned Ritika to stand next to her. Getting defiant Ritika stated, “If I don’t get stuck in traffic, I should be there in 20 minutes.”

Hanging up, Ritika started to remove her gold bangles, chain and earrings. When *Baba* approached her, she dumped her ornaments in his hands. Removing her jasmine *gajra* she explained, “I just got a call from work. I got to go.”

“I wish I had some place to go too,” said *Baba* with a twinkle in his eye. Ritika blinked back in solidarity and just as she turned to leave her ever alert mother stood in her way. “Baby *Tai* likes you a lot. Now wear your ornaments and go speak to her. Nikhil is a very good match,” ordered her mother.

“Why dont you marry him then?” snapped Ritika. Feeling bad, the next moment Ritika held her mother by her arms and said, “*Aai*, Mr. Sengupta has called for an urgent meeting. I have to go. I am sorry but tell Baby *Tai* I will write to Nikhil. Take his email address for me. Okay?” Saying this she pecked her mother on her forehead and walked off.

Her mother grunted as she looked at Mr. Khanolker. Poker faced, Mr. Khanolker searched for someone familiar in the crowd. Then, he waved out pretending he had spotted someone and mingled into the gathering.

When Ashu finally managed to get through to Ritika’s mobile, she was already in a cab, on her way to A.T’s. He was aghast and asked her not to go. There was no need after all. Ritika snapped at Ashu. After all she was a crime reporter who was cultivating a rapport with a gangster. She

reminded Ashu about the *gyaan* he had given her. “Remember? It was you who had said that a gangster is best source of information? Well we are on first name basis with one another.” Miffed, Ritika hung up. *Why could he not be happy for her!*

Suddenly it started to pour. Ritika hurriedly rolled up her window but the hasty Mumbai downpour had unleashed its fury.

After dismissing Hakim from duty, now A.T was alone in his flat. He started to adjust the lights and only stopped when it was dramatically dim enough. He then sprayed air-freshener and took a good look at himself in the mirror. He brushed his hair, checked his teeth, popped a mint and sprayed a generous swirl of ‘Clive Christian’s C. He then walked to the front door, opened it and left the door ajar.

Sitting back on the sofa he waited motionless. The cloudburst had reduced to a trickle. Minutes passed by and A.T heard the lift grind to a halt. A.T did not move but his body tensed up in anticipation.

The door, held ajar got pushed open as Ritika walked in. Wet from the rain, in a black chiffon, she looked breathtakingly sensuous. A.T could not take his eyes off her. He stood up. Feeling awkward under his gaze, Ritika adjusted a wet strand of her hair. She felt his eyes glance all over her body, and much to her surprise, she did not mind it.

While Ritika and A.T were grappling with uncomfortable silence, both thinking of what to say to each other, across the city, her furious *Aai* grumbled as they entered their flat. “*Aaho*, I am telling you if this behavior continues it will get difficult to find a boy for her.”

“Urmila don’t worry about her. My daughter will find a suitable man for herself,” said *Baba*.



And while A.T was in the kitchen making hot ginger tea, Ritika looked around the aesthetically lit dim apartment for cues. She was wondering how to break the ice. The sleek minimal décor was devoid of curios or paintings. She noticed the bar but knew very little about alcohol. *Maybe I should ask him about his proclivity for minimal aesthetics.* And after a beat she changed her mind. *That sounds too wannabe.* And then, as her eyes panned across, she noticed books! Placed neatly on the shelf adjacent to

the kitchen wall, there were novels by Wilbur Smith, Sidney Sheldon, James Hadley Chase and Jeffrey Archer.

I love the chemistry between Jennifer Parker and Micheal Moretti in Sidney Sheldon's The Rage of Angels', perhaps that can be my opening line' thought Ritika. Just then, A.T walked in with two glasses of tea in hand.

"The perfect drink. Thank-you," said Ritika taking a glass. "It is the only beverage that you can ask for at any given time or situation. I mean even at a funeral it is okay to sip the drink. Anytime is a good time for tea."

"It is single malt time for me," said A.T with a poker face. "I am eternally grateful to the Scottish for the golden liquid."

"And I am eternally grateful to Indians for *Chai!* Cheers," said Ritika delicately hoisting her glass.

A.T followed suit and without much ado, the two of them started talking. Breezy effortless conversations brewed over good old *chai*. There were no pretenses.

They spoke about many things...

Ritika told A.T how she had never gone beyond the usual Matheran, Mahabaleswar and Lonavala. But now that she was earning, she planned to travel. "I have started saving, for a trip to Europe. In a year I think I will have enough to go backpacking."

"Most people start with West Europe, like France and Italy. Perhaps you could start with Central Europe. It works out cheaper and is just as stunning. Transylvania and Budapest are magical, almost surreal."

Then they spoke of food. Ritika did not know much about the topic but was willing to learn. "I often read pan-seared in these new Thai Restaurants that have mushroomed in the city off late. Is pan seared the same as pan fry, like *tawa* fry?" she asked.

A.T explained the difference. "When you pan fry a piece of fish it is ready-to-eat, a complete cooking process. But pan searing means that you brown the meat on a very high flame to lock the juices. Then the meat can be roasted or grilled."

A.T then spoke about *Hongi*- the traditional meal of indigenous New Zealanders. Ritika noticed how passionately he spoke about the way the food was cooked. "It's so healthy," said A.T. She watched his long fingers as they moved expressively.

“They fire-up these hot stones. The meat is packed in leaves, then foliage then cloth and finally they plaster some earth to the food parcel. It is then placed on the stones. It is the healthiest meal I’ve ever had.”

“You are so lucky! You’ve been to New Zealand!”

‘She probably won’t have the same expression if I told her what I was sent for’ thought A.T with a hint of smile.

He asked her if she was hungry. She nodded eagerly and then, as an afterthought, wished that she had exercised restraint.

He invited her into his kitchen. She propped herself on the stool and watched him work. He chopped tomatoes and garlic, neat and quick. Drizzled olive oil and sparingly added salt and pepper. He then looked around and opened his window. Plucking some *Tulsi* leaves he said, “It has a stronger aroma than basil.”

He then buttered a thick slice of brown bread and put it in the toaster

“I am skeptical about this so called brown bread. I wonder if they simply coat it with caramel” said Ritika.

“Oh, this is made of *nachni*. I pick it from Crown Bakery next to Paradise Cinema in Mahim. They bake the best organic bread in the city.” He said and the toast popped out.

“You are really good at this,” she said biting into her bruschetta. Quickly she wiped the corner of her mouth with a serviette.

As time passed they spoke about their mutual love for novels, pulp fiction to be precise.

Then, he confessed to being a recluse. “I love my own company”. She confessed she was not the regular girl who wanted man –matrimony- and his mother-in-law. “I think marriage is more of an economic institution than a social one.”

“You are too young to think of marriage. Make your mark as a reporter, travel, see the world, and live it up. Who knows? Your opinion might just change with time,” he said.

“Do you believe in marriage?” she asked

“Yes.” He said and left it at that.

Then he told her about an incident from his childhood. About how he was petrified of water. While his friends swam he would sit by the banks of the river and keep a watch on their clothes and slippers. One day, his mother, passed by. She came to the rocky banks of the river. Without saying anything first she slapped him hard. Then she threw him into the water.

“I was gasping! I thought I’d sink and die! But then my feet touched the river bed. After that, slowly I learnt to swim. But I did not speak to my mother for days on end,” said A.T.

“Only a mother can teach a child the greatest lessons of life!”

“True. I learned to swim because of her.”

“I did not mean swimming...” she said and then slowly explained “She took away your fear. There was nothing left for you to fear.”

A.T stared into Ritika’s provocative eyes as the weight of what she said slowly sunk in.

That night he was not a gangster nor was she a crime reporter. They were just two individuals who shared a deep connection. Like long lost friends. As if they had met earlier. And perhaps they had, in another life time.

It was the change of light at the French windows that startled Ritika. She looked at her watch. 5:00 AM. “Oh my god!”, she said and rushed to the door. Before unlatching the door, she paused and looked back. A.T stood behind, calm as ever. “Thank-you for coming Ritika,” he said.

“We’ve got to do this again. And the next time,” said Ritika with a sudden change in tone, “We will talk shop.” Briskly she shut the door on A.T.

‘*How effortless was our association,*’ thought Ritika as she huddled herself. It was a windy twilight. The street lights were on and Pochkhanawala Road was empty. The deserted street did not worry her as much as what her mother would say when she’d get back. ‘*Aai is going to grumble all day.*’ Then looking at the ink blue sky she turned back to see if any cab was driving past. There was none. ‘*My city is safe,*’ she thought and walked on.

She was right. Back then in 1999 mugging and street assaults against women were unheard off. What was common place, was encounters and inter -gang shoot outs in broad day light. The common man was untouched.

At that moment, an empty cab ambled past. Ritika hailed for it to stop and got inside knowing she was in for a long lecture from her mother. What she did not know was that, all along A.T kept a watch on her from the 10th floor of his terrace apartment. If Ritika were to get harassed by a passerby, A.T was ready with the Remington 700 aimed for target.

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Luckily for Ritika, *Aai* had no chance to reprimand her. As soon as she rang the bell to her house, Ritika got a call on her Siemens. The display flashed “unknown number”. Ritika took the call. As she heard the person on the other line, she started to frown. She was listening with such razor-sharp focus that when *Aai* opened the door, geared up to admonish Ritika, she simply let her daughter in.

With the thick mobile still planted to her ears, Ritika walked towards the TV set. It was perched on a chest of drawers. She opened the first and rummaged around till she found a pen. Then scribbled on a tatty newspaper to check if it was working.

As there was no writing pad she could find, Ritika started to make notes on her palm: 5000 gm, Cocaine, Mahim Fort, 4:30 AM, 5th Oct.

The caller hung up. Ritika paused to think through: That morning was the 4th of October 1999. The landing would take place within 24 hours. She had learnt that if a person was caught with anything more than 5 grams of Cocaine he or she could be arrested on grounds of being a drug peddler. 5000 grams, 5 kilos were way big an amount.

Why would anyone give me a tip? Who knows of me? Why was the tip not given to a senior reporter of a bigger news network? Why me? Was it A. T? But the man sounded nothing like him... But then, does it matter?

As these questions ran through her mind Ritika dialed Agastya Sengupta's number at 5: 57 AM that morning. She knew it was too early to call her boss, but she did it anyway. At most he'd hang up on her, she thought.

However, Sengupta did not care that Ritika had woken him up. He was a man on a mission: to make his start-up City-News channel as big as The National News Network. And feisty reporters would help him achieve his goal. He had spent enough years to know that Ritika Khanolker would be a reporter to reckon with in the future. She had that spark.

In the moment, Ritika spoke in haste.

- Sir I got an anonymous call about a contraband of pure cocaine landing in the city!

- I keep getting anonymous calls Ritika, most crime reporters do. They are crank calls. To pay attention the call must come *at least* twice.

- I thought so... And he said something as silly as Mahim Fort. That's impossible I guess. How can cocaine be shipped in the middle of the city? I should have thought through that one.

- Hmm... you can't rule the possibility out. Mahim is Usman Ali's stronghold...

- Sir what would you do in this case?

- At first, I would tell my boss and keep a cameraman on hold. Ashu is your man.

- And then?

- Next you will have to wait.

- For the 2nd call. Assuming I get the 2nd call...then?

"Inform Pathak and take it from there." Saying this Sengupta hung up. He did not like to spoon feed his reporters. They had to find their own way. Just as he had.

Ritika did not wait for the second call and dialed Pathak. She was not surprised that her call went unanswered. It was too early in the morning and she was too junior. Though she had met him at a Police Press Conference earlier, she knew, that her number would not be registered in his mobile. However, she decided to be persistent with text messages and phone calls.

Pathak was in Matheran for a quick honeymoon. It was indeed a late marriage for the super fit 44-year-old cop. Until his wedding day he had no time to see his to-be wife. But that did not bother him. His mother selected her. So, it must be a decent choice. After all who worries more about a man than his mother, right? Secretly he had hated the weekend

'*marriage –tamasha*' as he called it, and was desperate to get back on the prowl.

But there was something alluring about his bride. She wore her *mangalsutra* and saree with pride. She followed all the customs with élan. And with that same elegance she loved her alcohol and cigarettes which she consumed in copious quantities in the afterhours.

When he had asked about it on their wedding night she had explained, "All day I please the world. My parents, my extended family. Now I will have to do that with your family. Your relatives. But after everybody sleeps - the night is mine. I was never allowed to go out. So, in rebellion I smoked and drank after they slept. Turns out, I enjoy it. It's now sort of 'me' time."

Pathak could not stop smiling. He knew that it was only a matter of time he'd fall madly in love with her. His wife's frankness was not just endearing; it was refreshing too. The world where he belonged was entrenched in politics and deceit.

The newly-weds had not slept since the wedding night. And just as they finished making love "one more last time" as Mrs. Pathak teased, he glanced at the flashing display of his silent mobile.

The number was unknown to him. But the caller had phoned 20 times at a stretch. He realized messages were piling at an alarming rate into his inbox. Just as he was about to open it, the caller called yet again. This time Pathak took the call.

"Good morning, I am reporter Ritika Khanolker from City-News."

"I am off duty."

"10 crores worth of cocaine will be landing in Mahim tonight sir."

Pathak was quiet. He showed no reaction. His bride sifted through the sheets and lazily lit up a post coital cigarette.

"Hello?"

"This is in the purview of the NCB, Narcotics Control Bureau. You should call one of their officers."

"Sir can you give me a lead in the NCB?"

"Ask your seniors to do that," he snapped again and hung up on her.

In her naiveté, Ritika thought that all she would have to do was call a senior police officer and give him the lead. He'd then act on the

information provided and she'd have her breaking news at hand. But Pathak had shown no interest. Apparently.

As he walked towards his bride to make love to her 'one more last time', 10 crores of cocaine echoed through his mind. *'That means around 5000 grams of contraband. Mahim is Usman Ali's bastion. And Usman Ali is Sultaan of narcotics. But a landing in Mahim? Middle of the city? That's audacious! I must find out from Kaloti.'*

Infamously nick-named as *Double Dholki*, Inspector Kaloti was an Usman loyalist. Many of Usman's illegal activities had been supported by Kaloti in the past. But everyone, including Usman knew that Kaloti owed allegiance to the force that suited him.

Pathak knew of his subordinate's notorious reputation but he did not take any action. Instead he used the valuable intelligence that Kaloti unintentionally provided him, to his benefit. And sometimes when he had to covertly pass stern messages to gangsters, he'd mention it casually to Kaloti. Promptly the message would reach and the gangster would straighten up.

He also knew that in the past Kaloti had helped Usman's landings in Versova and Marve as well. Quantities were small then and Pathak had let it slip. But this was a sizeable contraband and if it was getting shipped in, under Kaloti's aegis, he would be behind bars as well, Pathak resolved.

Pathak decided to hear the truth from the horse's mouth. However, if he called the inspector this early from his honeymoon, Kaloti would be guarded. And since Pathak had to wait for two hours before calling Kaloti at 9:00 AM he thought he'd make the most of 'one more last time' with Mrs. Pathak.

In 1999, at the turn of the century, mobile call charges were astronomically high. Outgoing calls at peak hours were charged at ₹16 per minute. An incoming call would cost ₹8. To save costs most people back then gave missed calls to one another.

But on 23 October 1999 many calls were made back, and forth due to the anonymous call an intern from a start-up cable-news network had received.

- Ritika Khanolkar called Kirti Vij. Her classmate from college, who was now a public relations officer with the Naval Coast Guard.

- Kirti Vij made calls to find out if any suspicious maritime activity had been detected.

- In Mantralaya, Home Minister Jayant Dahanuker received an anonymous call.

- Minutes later Jayant Dahanuker spoke to 'Boss', Khalif Ahmed from an unclassified number.

- Jayant Dahanuker then made a call to Joint Commissioner of Police -Crime.

- ACP Pathak finally got through to Inspector Kaloti.

Like a shrewd cop ACP Pathak withheld information.

"*Kaloti sunney main aaya hain* that a consignment of cocaine is landing in the city today. Have you heard anything?"

If the landing was Usman's, then Kaloti would surely know of it, surmised ACP Pathak. His subordinate would not tell him outright, but 22 years of police service had made ACP Pathak a good listener. He heard what people said and most importantly the things *they did not say*.

Strangely Kaloti had no idea, realized Pathak through their interaction.

"Where is the landing Sir?"

"No idea Kaloti, but 5 kilos of cocaine means a red flag. It's worth 10 crores. Can you check with the NCB if they have any intel on this?"

"Yes sir."

Kaloti hung up. He speculated: Such a large quantity could only be Usman Ali's. Kaloti had helped Usman in the past. Why would Usman not keep him in the loop this time?

However, being a part of the team that nabbed 5000 grams of pure cocaine belonging to Usman would be a feather in his cap as a police officer. He'd also be able to salvage his tarnished reputation in the force. But then, on the other hand it would mean a lot of money if he tipped off Usman about this information... *Better still, I will nab the contraband and instead of burning it like we always do, I will make an offer to Usman and burn chalk powder instead to show my seniors that the work is done. But why has Usman kept me out?*

The thought bothered him to no end.



Keen on making the Mahim coast an impregnable turf with Mahim Fort as its head office, Usman Ali had decided to clip Kaloti's wings. For Double-Dholki was not a man to be trusted. Kaloti worked from both sides. Usman needed a police officer he could bank on. He met ACP Singh from Mahim Police Station. Usman and Singh clicked a deal. A fraction of the value of goods would go to Singh. It worked for Usman too as he could now control all his landings ...right in his back-waters.

At that moment Kaloti started making calls. He oscillated between Narcotics Control Bureau and Enforcement Directorate.

An hour later there was a red flag about an unmarked dinghy floating in the international waters!

Kaloti called Pathak and informed him of the same. "I will call you back," said Pathak and hung up.

In the meantime, across the city, in C-News office, Ashu switched on the TV set and started to switch channels randomly. He stopped at Discovery Channel to watch a tiger get ready for a kill. Ritika stared at the TV monitor without actually watching it. Her mind was focused on how to shoot the cocaine landing at night.

She shut her eyes and revisited the Mahim coastline. There was the Fort and Koliwada on one side. A strip of sand ran from the fort, right up to Hinduja Hospital and beyond. There was a rocky creek of Bandra Reclamation on the other side.

She would need a long tele-photo lens to record the nefarious activity. Also shooting at night meant she'd need a source of light.

Ritika asked Ashu, "Assuming we have a tele-photo lens, what is the farthest we can shoot from?"

"Not more than 250 meters ...but why are you asking?"

Ritika did not answer. The coast was sandy. There were no bushes or rocks to seek cover. After all she'd need to be safe. In the heat of the moment she did not care about her safety. She was worried that they did not have adequate equipment for the nature of the shoot.

But there has to be a way out, thought Ritika as she stared at the TV set.

"What cameras do wildlife photographers use? And how do they shoot at night?" she asked out loud.

Ashu looked at her. He did not know. Neither did she. But she knew that she was onto something. Shooting a tiger at night meant the photographer had to be safe, at a reasonable distance ... If one could shoot a tiger then shooting a drug landing was possible.

1999 was a world when Google was making in-roads and social networking was unheard off.

Ritika contacted her photography teacher from college and from her she got the name and number of the only former student who was pursuing wildlife photography.

Luck was on her side as Tanya Bami, the wildlife photographer was in Mumbai. Ritika asked Tanya about what could she do to shoot in the night without divulging too much information.

Tanya told her about the kind of camera she would need. "You will need 300 mm lens and a thermal imaging camera that can detect a six-foot person from 274 meters in virtual darkness," said Tanya swiftly.

"Tanya I'd be eternally grateful if I could borrow your thermal imaging camera please?"

There was a pause on the other end.

"Sorry but I am not comfortable giving it to an intern," said Tanya coldly.

"I understand. But I won't be using it. Ashutosh Nagpal is a renowned cameraman ...he has won awards ...and your equipment will be in safe hands. He has been on the field for 10 years... 2 years more than you have Tanya...and ...and we will be using his still camera...which still camera do you own Ashu?" asked Ritika holding the phone away.

Ashu was shocked. For Ritika was lying through her teeth. He had won no award and had been on-field for just 5 years. Probably, he was younger to Bami.

Much to her surprise on the other end of the line Tanya Bami chuckled, "You are so pushy you little cat!"

"Tanya?" said Ritika and continued, "I will also need a 300-mm lens please?"



Three hours later Tanya Bami was in City-News office with her equipment: camera, lens and she had also got a portable tripod.

“You forgot to mention tripod. You will need this too.”

Ritika hugged her like a long-lost sister and promised she'd be careful. Ashu tinkered with the camera.

“Just make sure you don't damage anything. It will cost you your balls,” said Tanya Bami to Ashu as she sauntered off.

Ritika was now equipped with her tools.

“Well, at least one thing has worked in our favour.”

“Two,” stated Ashu and continued, “Tonight is low tide ...we can walk all the way from Reclamation to Mahim fort if we wish!”

Instead of being elated, suddenly her heart sank. How was she going to ensure her safety and that of Ashu without any police protection?

Ritika stared at the TV screen sans expression. Now she was getting seriously worried. *Maybe it's a bad idea. Maybe I should not go. I am scared.*

After that nothing happened till mid-night.

At 12:07 AM Pathak got a call from his senior, DCP Ishwar Daga, “Narco landing in Mahim? These gangsters must be taught a lesson. The public has to have faith in us. Go for it Pathak.”

At 12: 24: AM Pathak and his wife packed up and paid off the guest house. They walked to Dasturi, the car-halt for Matheran.

At 12: 40: Pathak was on his way to Mumbai. He thought of Ritika Khanolker who had persistently called that morning. He was dismissive with her and that's why perhaps she had given up, he thought.

At 3:30 AM: Pathak and his team which included Kaloti reached Mahim Koliwada.

Pathak looked around speculating a modus operandi, when in the farthest corner of Mahim Koliwada where the creek touched the rocky shores of Bandra Reclamation he saw some activity. On his guard, he looked through his binoculars.

300 meters away, he saw two people walking through the low tide. Suddenly the couple stopped started to set up a tripod in the slush.

Ritika Khanolker was on the anvil of her first investigative story and nothing was going to stop her.

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2 hours 30 minutes later

In the background was a tiny boat. Piled on its edge, were packets of cocaine. A constable held back a leash of a sniffer dog as it tried to scramble forward. To the side, was a police-van in which, arrested men were escorted in. Ritika stood in front of the frame and looked confidently into the lens of the camera. It was the second night in a row that she had not slept and yet she looked fresh from all the flurry. She was set for her 'Piece-To-Camera'. Ashu looked into the view-finder, signaled thumbs-up and said "Rolling."

RITIKA

*Breaking News! It is 6:00 AM and Mumbai Crime Branch, has just raided a dinghy which was carrying cocaine worth 10 crores. I repeat behind me what you see is approximately 5 kilos of cocaine worth 10 crores. It was found in this small boat along with large catches of fish in Mahim Coastal waters. 5 men were arrested on-the-spot and one got grievously injured as he tried to run away. Let me remind you that City-News has broken this story. The raid happened less than an hour ago- right here on this beach. To know more let us speak to the police officer who spear headed this incursion –
ACP Pathak from Crime Branch.*

Ashu panned the camera to include Pathak in the frame. He answered Ritika's questions as objectively as possible. Like always, he withheld more than what he revealed. However, towards the end of his discourse

he calculatedly let a piece of information slip by. "... One of the suspects, the one who is injured has a criminal record. Back then he used to work for Usman Ali."

Ritika: In that case, would you say that this contraband belongs to Usman Ali?

ACP Pathak: That we shall know only after further investigation.

"Thank you for your time sir," said Ritika and turned towards the camera. "Acting quick on the behest of a lead, Mumbai Crime Branch has nabbed Rs 10 crores of cocaine. On ground from Mahim Creek with cameraman Ashutosh Nagpal, this is Ritika Khanolker, City News Mumbai."

As she signed off on-screen, alone in his apartment now, A.T heaved a sigh. Mission accomplished. His presumption had worked. Eager to prove her mettle in the professional world, the novice had bit the bait. It was important for Usman Ali to become a bad man in the eyes of the common one. And Ritika Khanolker, in her naiveté would help A.T do just that.

On the spur of the moment, A.T made up his mind. He'd invite Ritika over for dinner that night.

He then wondered what to make. Grilled fish? Or a cold shrimp salad with wine? No, that was too romantic. Seafood risotto? What if she did not eat sea food? Or should he stick to chicken? How about a hearty chicken stew with chick peas and pasta? Would she find that too fattening? A rack of roast lamb? No. That would be overwhelming. Chicken was a safe bet. Dry chicken cooked with fresh herbs. Yup! Perfect. It was simple, nothing too fancy ...but then...what if she was vegetarian?

He was glad. For now, he had an acceptable reason to call her.

Ritika cut A.T's call almost as quickly as it rang. She was with Ashu in Agastya Sen Gupta's cabin. For a change her boss wasn't preoccupied. He smiled at them. "Good job you two. Ashu superb! You are the best cameraman we have! Ritika, if you continue with the same zest, the sky is the limit lady. Don't ever lose your spunk and now," said the eccentric bureau chief, "please leave."

As they walked out of the cabin Ashu said, "Let's celebrate."

"Sure! Chalo."

“I go to Toto’s in Bandra. I meet my trigger-happy buddies there. Most of them work in television but no one is into news.”

“Except you! Would love to meet your friends Ashu. I will join you in just a minute.”

Saying this Ritika walked to her workstation and Ashu went out for a smoke. Bhasker stared at Ritika as she breezed past. *How did she get the lead? Who has she connected with in such a short span of time?* Ignoring Bhasker’s gaze Ritika stared at the computer screen for a beat and then clicked on the mouse. And while her computer was shutting down, Ritika thought of A.T. She knew that the lead had come from him, though the actual caller was someone else. However, she would not bring that up with him. Not just yet. Sometimes, feigning ignorance is the best way to take a relationship forward, or maintain it.

She dialed his number as she left office.



On TV, City News was on ‘mute’ and the only movement in the crowded cabin was that of a crony rolling a joint. Usman Ali was seething as he stared hard at Singh. He realized that it was a mistake to not have continued with Kaloti. His informers had mentioned that Kaloti was a part of the squad that nabbed his contraband. That meant that if he paid the police officer well, Usman had a good chance of retrieving his cocaine. Despite not wanting to, he had to get Kaloti back on his side.

The story began to play yet again. Usman got up and started to pace down the room. He had had an overwhelming loss because of the raid. But that did not worry him as much as how ugly he looked in that outdated mug-shot that kept airing on C-News that evening. He dialed a number.

“Your channel has aired the news 16 times, make sure it stops,” ordered Usman Ali and hung up without waiting for Bhasker’s reaction.

His joint was ready and the crony handed it to Usman. Taking it, Usman said, “*Double Dholki ko phone laga...*”



This time *Aai* and *Baba* were alone in their flat. Ritika’s father did not take his eyes off the TV set. The mother could not stop flashing her toothy smile. They were so proud to see their daughter interview a respected

police officer of the city! The gravity of Ritika meddling in Usman's affairs, the volume of cocaine or its worth – none of these factors had even occurred to the simpletons.

In Toto's, Ashu waxed eloquent about Ritika Khanolker. His buddies, a group of photographers and cameramen were interested in knowing how Ashu shot the police raid. What equipment he had used? What were the features of the night vision camera? But Ashu could not stop praising Ritika and how cool she was.

"Where is she?" asked one of them getting a tad irritated.

"She will be here any minute. We were on our way here but something came up," said Ashu and ordered for a second pitcher of beer for him and his friends. A clean hearted young man, he was genuinely happy for what his colleague had accomplished.

Unlike Sulochana Sharma. "I am still waiting for my big story and look at you! Wow! Congratulations," said a bitter-sweet Sulochana as she hopped into an auto.

"Thanks, Sulochana," said Ritika walking across the terrace. She was in A.T's flat.

As she ambled along she looked at A.T. He was in his ritzy kitchen slicing tomatoes on a wooden chopping board. Next to him was a glass filled with whiskey, topped with cubes of ice. A tall bottle of The Macallan stood on the countertop. He looked up at her and smiled. She smiled back and looked away. Night had set in. Yellow and blue lights dotted neighbouring buildings. Sulochana went on and on about how impressive Ritika's breaking news was. Ritika wished that this moment would last forever.

"...Great! Thanks Sulochana. See you soon!" she said and slid the French window to step into the flat. She quite liked the music playing in the background though she did not know what it was. Buddha Bar, Volume 1 was not out in the Indian market yet. A.T had managed to procure Claude Challe's mix of music through a Parisian hit-man he had happened to borrow a gun from earlier that year.

"Sorry," she shrugged sheepishly as she perched herself on the bar stool now. Ever since she had walked into his apartment her phone had not stopped ringing.

"It is your day," he said as he poked the chicken drumsticks in the strainer. Then, looking back at her he asked, "wine?"

Ritika nodded, "I don't drink."

"That's sad." He picked the strainer and placed it on the counter. One by one he removed freshly washed legs of the chicken. Ritika noticed his neat manicured fingers as he twisted the pepper-mill over them. A.T moved aside and put the saucepan on the cooking ring. Gently he switched the gas on and coated the pan with cooking spray. He came back to the counter and began to trim a bunch of bright green coriander and fresh red chillies. Casually he sipped his whiskey. There was an easy elegance about A.T as he added pepper coated chicken legs to the hot saucepan.

"Why don't you drink?" asked A.T as he tossed the drumsticks lightly.

"Well..." Ritika said, "I guess I was never exposed to alcohol. In my family it is considered to be a bad thing."

"Try some white wine tonight. Goes well with chicken."

"But you are drinking whiskey."

"Want to try some?"

"Why are you so keen on getting me drunk?"

"Because you are beautiful and I want to take advantage of you."

Ritika looked at him. He was *sans* expression. She did not know whether the comment was a joke or a serious suggestion.

"Tell me," said Ritika quickly changing the conversation, "how come you have your whiskey neat? No soda? No water?"

"Whiskey is supposed to be had neat. It is too hot in India which is why ice works best. The soda water combination dilutes the rich texture of the single malt," saying this he took a small sip and went on to espouse the art of drinking whiskey with great passion.

"You are the only man I know who cooks. And you do it so meticulously."

"What about you? Do you cook?"

"I can't make myself a cup of tea."

"Uff! I have to teach you so many things...make tea, appreciate music, sample cuisines..."

"And," added Ritika "enjoy alcohol!"

They smiled at each other. Just then her mobile beeped. Checking her phone Ritika announced, "It is ACP Pathak, he has asked me to meet him."

A.T glanced at the wall clock. It was 8:00. "Come I'll drop you," he said.

"No thanks. I will manage," she said as she got up. Preoccupied now, she walked to the sofa, picked her bag, and without saying good bye, Ritika breezed out the door.

A.T put himself in Pathak's shoes. He knew what was troubling the officer. He had to think of a plan. Fast.



| 14

Led by a female constable, Ritika Khanolker walked into Pathak's cabin. The officer asked the constable to wait with them. Generally, women were not to be summoned to Police Stations after 7:00 in the evening. But Pathak was keen to know how an intern from a relatively new cable channel had gotten hold of this vital piece of information.

He stood up and shook hands with her. As they sat he told her that since she had worked as a police informer on a successful raid she was liable to get 10% of the value of stolen goods. Ritika did not bother to calculate. She was not in it for the money.

Pathak then went on to tell her the ramifications: that if and when Usman's case would come up in court, Ritika would have to be a police witness. Ritika nodded *'that means I have Pathak on my side. He knows my name and has my number.'*

Rolling his sleeves, he asked her the real question.

"Who called you?"

Ritika placed her mobile on the table and slid it towards Pathak.

"You can check my phone records sir. It was an unknown number," she stated, looking Pathak in the eye. She was telling the truth, he could tell.

"It was a very big tip. Really big."

"The only thing I did was to make sure that I did not give the story away to a senior."

“Smart move.”

“Sir, what now? Does Usman Ali get arrested?”

Before Pathak could answer – Ritika’s phone began to vibrate. Both glanced at the display. ‘Unknown Number’ kept flashing through. Pathak pointed to the phone. Warily, Ritika answered it. Before she could even say hello – a raspy male voice started to dole information in chaste Hindi.

And while Ritika heard him she took a pen from Pathak’s pen stand and started to scribble on her palm. Pathak pushed forth a writing pad. Ritika scribbled *ammunition...sten guns ... live cartridges...Sewri...*

And then she scribbled *Sarkar Bank*.

Pathak glanced at the chit and signaled to give the phone to him. Ritika nodded and said “Hello...hello sorry I can’t hear you... hello,” she said and gave the phone to Pathak.

Mobiles back then did not have speakers. Pathak heard the voice until the unknown caller hung up on his accord.



Days later, in his timber mart, Usman Ali was on the phone discussing the details of a hawala transaction. Placed on top of a pile of logs his TV was on mute and City News was on-air. After the raid, City News was the only channel Usman Ali watched.

As he spoke, he saw footage of sten guns, barrel pistols and live cartridges. He then peered at the image of Sarkar bank. And when he saw a mug-shot of Hassan he hung up and pressed the mute button on the remote control.

Sten gun, magazines, live cartridges, barrel pistols and gun powder were found in bank lockers when the Mumbai Crime Branch raided Sarkar Bank in Sewri last evening. The account holder is the sister of the deceased gangster Hassan Sulieman who was shot in the legendary Khalif-Usman gang war last year. Hassan was thick with Usman and their association spanned over decades. Bureau Report, City-News Mumbai.

Usman stood still. He wondered who in the underworld could have access to such confidential information. It had been Hassan’s idea to hide smuggled ammunition in a bank locker. Usman’s mind started to tick...

From Bhasker Menon, Usman found out about the reporter. She was the same one who had broken the news of his cocaine-bust. From, Kaloti he got to know about the officer-in-charge. He tried to find a link between the senior police officer he feared and the intern he had no clue of.

He could not connect the dots.

In the news studio Ashu tinkered with a new DV camera. Ritika read aloud from the manual. Ritika and Ashu enjoyed each other's company in office. Ritika was eager to learn new things. A film festival buff, Ashu, had introduced Ritika to the magical celluloid world of Pedro Almodovar, Julio Medem, Maajid Majidi and Krzysztof Kieslowski.

Bhasker came to the studio and pulled a chair.

"So?" he asked as he sat beside them, "Romeo- Juliet of C-News!"

Ritika continued to read ignoring the comment. So, did Ashu as he studied the LCD screen of his new camera.

"Guys be careful. Two back to back stories about the same gangster might prove detrimental. Usman Ali is likely to hit back. I suggest you speak to Sengupta and pull that bank story off now. I am saying this for your good," warned Bhasker.

Realizing they were both disinterested, Bhasker got up. "Good teamwork, both of you. By the way, where do you get your information from Ritika?"

This was the moment Ritika had been waiting for. Keeping the manual aside she looked at him and smiled. "Sir? Would you like to meet my *Khabree*?"



Ritika left office early that evening. She stood waiting for a bus to take her home. As she looked around she saw a man across the street stare at her. Short and unassuming he was someone who could be lost in the crowd. There was nothing distinctive about him except his blank gaze on her.

A BEST bus ranged in front of the man, blocking her view. When the bus moved past, Ritika saw that the man was not there. Her phone rang. She looked at the display. The call was from an unknown number.

Smiling to herself, calmly, she put the phone to her ear. She had never heard such filthy abuses in 22 years of her life. They were so dirty that she was too shocked to react. After spewing venom, the caller told to stay away from Usman Ali or else she'd find her breasts sliced off and fed to stray dogs. The caller hung up.

Ritika was so overwhelmed that she kept holding the phone to her ear till it rang yet again. Jolting out of her trance, Ritika looked at her phone and cut the call. It was from home. Now was not the time.

She felt like reaching out to A.T. There was something reassuring even at the thought of him. Ritika dialed A.T and when she heard his deep sophisticated hello, she knew she had nothing to fear.

But Ritika could not reply. For she broke down sobbing.



| 15

“I know of many good reporters who have received threats. No one usually does anything,” said ACP Pathak trying his best to assuage Ritika on the phone. “But, yes, most warnings are never from gangsters. They are from the *baap* of gangsters-the politicians.”

ACP Pathak then put her at ease when he said that since she had been a police informer technically on two occasions and would be their main prosecution witness, it was his duty to watch her back.

To hear that was reassuring. Though that was not something Ritika wanted. She wanted to be free. Free to investigate stories, unearth the truth and deep down, free to meet A.T.

“Thank you sir,” she said. Putting her phone in the bag, Ritika walked out of the deserted lane and hailed for a cab to go home. She had done everything that A.T had told her to do: find a relatively empty lane so no passerby could hear her conversation, inform Pathak and then go home. Ritika had insisted they meet, but he was against it. All eyes were on Ritika Khanolker and a link to A.T would be detrimental to her career. She knew he was right but all she wanted to do in the moment was to hold him.

In Crime Branch, ACP Pathak called Kaloti and said, “Ritika Khanolker from City News has complained of threats and filthy abuses from Usman Ali. If anything goes wrong with the reporter, let’s do an encounter in broad day light. We can’t have the city ruled by gangsters.”

Saying this Pathak hung up. He had no plans to kill Usman. In fact, he was one of those police officers who did not believe in Encounters. All

he wanted to do was to warn him. And by telling Kaloti, he knew that his message would reach the gang lord.

Ritika alighted from the cab and took the change. On the pavement she saw the same man she had seen earlier in the evening. He was staring at her. She put her wallet in her bag and looked at him yet again. The man continued to stare at her. Ritika quickly entered her building and ran up 3 stories. It was always dark in the corridor and that had never bothered Ritika, until now. She stood in front of the door and caught her breath. Just as she was about to ring the bell she heard someone whisper her name.

When she turned, A.T was standing right behind her. He gently held her hand and escorted her up a flight of stairs to the landing of the terrace. Ritika had tears in her eyes and she hugged him like a small child. He hugged her back. “*Shh...shhh...don't worry,*” he whispered.

She cried softly and he wiped her tears. “Look at me, Ritika. Look up.” She looked up wearily. He cupped her face, “As long as I am alive, I will never bring you any harm. You are with me and you are safe.” Saying this he hugged her again.

Then they sat on the step, and A.T lit a cigarette.

“I hope this is alright with you? Me being here?”

“No problem. After all we are friends.”

“Just friends?”

“By the way,” Ritika said as she shifted aside, “there is a man following me.”

“He is my man. 2 breaking news back-to-back is dangerous. I saw this coming. So, I had to make sure you were safe.”

Ritika paused for a beat and looked at him

“How long will this go on A.T?”

A.T paused to think as he took another drag. “The only way to stop Usman is to kick him where it hurts the most. Usman’s biggest chunk of the business comes from making counterfeit notes. What nobody knows is that he does this in the heart of the city, in Masjid Bunder. You can’t imagine the set-up he has put in there. But Ritika if you break this news it will be your last,” said A.T looking her in the eye.



The cold shower was refreshing. Ritika then moisturized her body and wore a fresh pair of pajamas and a T-Shirt. After that she had a comforting dinner of steaming hot rice, pink tangy *sol kadi* and a crackling piece of freshly fried *rawas*. As she crunched into a slice of onion she thought of what to do with the information A.T had given her. Her parents were watching TV and she was glad they left her alone. Ritika did not say a word to her parents about Usman's threat. They would get worried.

After dinner, Ritika brushed slowly as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Suddenly she had an idea! Spitting the froth out hastily, she went to her room locked the door and dialed Sulochana. She chatted up with her like a long-lost friend. In the midst of friendly *gup-shup* Ritika casually mentioned about Usman's counterfeit set-up in Masjid Bunder and quickly went on to gossip about Ashu and how cute he was.

Sulochana registered the details amidst the banter. She wondered why Ritika was not acting upon the information but chose to be quiet. How she had waited for such a lead for years! Now, decided Sulochana, that she too would break a sensational story...

And that's what Ritika wanted! She wanted someone else to take credit for breaking the news.

Three weeks later Ritika Khanolker read Sulochana Sharma's report in Samachar. Usman Ali made fake currency notes in the heart of the city. The deserted factory from where he operated had been sealed. Five people died in the police skirmish.

Ritika called Sulochana and congratulated her. She did not bring up their telephone conversation. And neither did Sulochana give Ritika credit for the lead.

Within a month there were 3 exposes against Usman Ali. The press began to demand explanations from Home Minister Jayant Dahanukar. Owing allegiance to Khalif Ahmed, Dahanukar was only too happy to comply with the demands of the press. He assured them that strict action would be taken.

The police, however, could not arrest Usman. Because, Inspector Kaloti was an eager father. He wanted to send his young son to the US to study MBA. However, with a salary of Rs.15,000/- a month he could not afford it.

When he found out, A.T satiated Kaloti's dream for a price...

Usman was hiding in one of his gambling dens in Mahim when Pathak and Kaloti broke in. Usman picked his gun, Kaloti winked at Usman and gave a slight nod insinuating that Usman should run. Usman charged towards the door.

Pathak shouted, "Usman Stop!" But Usman knew the gullies of Mahim and was sure he could escape into one of them. As he charged towards the door he shot a bullet in air indicating he was armed. Pathak started to shoot bullets carefully avoiding Usman's head or the back of his chest. In retaliation Usman opened fire as he turned to the door. Just then one bullet struck at the back of his head. When Usman curved back to fall he saw Kaloti standing still holding onto his aim. Kaloti had shot him in the skull. Pathak looked at Kaloti and wondered what could have brought about this act.

Many benefitted from Usman Ali's death. Kaloti cleared his reputation. Pathak became a demi-god, a hope for the city. The Home Minister was happy because it meant his party cared for the people of Mumbai. From an intern, Ritika Khanolker got a permanent letter from City-News. She was a reporter to be reckoned with. And A.T became the blue-eyed boy of the Khalif Gang.

He had ended the legendary Khalif-Usman rivalry without the traditional gang war. Usman had died in a Police Encounter. An encounter that seemed real. The police had gone to arrest him. Usman tried to flee and opened fire at the cops. They retaliated by shooting a volley of bullets. And one of them hit him in the head. All this was possible because of the media war A.T had orchestrated to eliminate Usman. A media war in which he had manipulated Ritika Khanolker.

Just like a tiger who owns the jungle, A.T strode leisurely down the suite of New Uran Hotel listening to his Boss sing praises about him. After all he was instrumental in getting Boss' rival out of the scene just the way he had been told to. Now Khalif's crime syndicate was the only underworld left in the financial capital of India. "We will make a lot more money now A.T. All thanks to you," chirped Khalif Ahmed.

As he walked down, he looked at Babban Mistry inhale steam from an oversize *kadhai*. Despite being a daily witness to this eye-sore, A.T could never get accustomed to it. Something about the *kadhai*, the smell of the vapor-rub, Mistry's flushed face dripping with water and sweat made him nauseous. Sometimes he felt like wringing Mistry's neck with the thin white *pancha* that he used to cover his head. But A.T brushed the thought

aside as soon as it entered his mind. Because Mistry, despite his demotion in the gang, meant well and supported A.T whole-heartedly.

“Now go on and enjoy your success. I am sending 50 lakhs *bakshish*. Just for you,” said Khalif Ahmed on the other line.

“I will share the booty with my boys. It was Mistry who forged the meeting with Kaloti. Munawar made the anonymous calls to the reporter and we cant do much without Hakim’s technical support,” said A.T loud enough for everyone to hear.

He noticed Hakim tug his brand new T-Shirt. Mistry too was wearing a new kurta. Munawar got A.T a fresh peg of whiskey and took his empty glass away. He smelled of *ittar*.

A.T had to admit that Munawar was an asset when it came to instilling fear amongst rivals and associates.

As a child, Munawar was often teased for his height. At 29 he was 4 feet 11 inches tall. But what he lost in height he made up for in brute strength. For all his smoking, drinking and debauchery was compensated with heavy workouts in the *akhada*.

Munawar had a reputation for being a sadist. In charge of extortion, if the victim refused to pay-up, Munawar would personally show up. His scarred black bulbous lips and cool green eyes were menacing. If anyone refused, Munawar made sure that the payment came through with interest.

Once, a film producer. Munawar went to his office. The producer was not the one to get affected by his looks. He asked him to have a cup of tea and then talk. When the office peon got a tray, Munawar grabbed the producer by his collar and pulled him close. Then smiling Munawar removed a sharp knife from his pocket. He smiled as he pierced the weapon gently into the producer’s cheekbone and dragged it all the way down to the cleft of his chin. The office was too shocked to react. Munawar walked out with the money and 10% interest for delayed payment as well.

Now, Munawar sang to Hakim and Mistry:

“A phor atrangi

B phor Bhai,

C phor Crime

D phor Dubai!”

Hakim guffawed over the silly ditty. Mistry smiled as he got up and wiped his face with the *pancha*. When A.T removed a cigarette, Munawar got up and put his lighter out for A.T

A.T removed two thick bundles of Rs.500 currency notes from his pocket. He gave one to Hakim and the other to Munawar. “Go on boys. Enjoy the *sharab, kabab* and *shabab*.”

“A.T it’s a big day for us. You should come too. I know the dance bars of Panvel are no match to *apna* Carnival, but so what?” said Mistry looking up from the steam.

At Carnival, a popular dance bar on Worli’s Annie Besant Road, each of the gangsters had their favourite girl.

Munawar liked Susan for her anglicized name. Hakim was comfortable with a 16-year-old Dimple from the heart of Uttar Pradesh. Mistry’s taste was off the beaten track. He liked a combination of older, plumper and slightly lackluster women. A.T liked a towering dusky girl called Jaana. Clearly Jaana was not her real but her ‘professional name’.

A.T was not a regular client at the bar. When he did go to watch Jaana he would put out a thick wad of notes. Hakim would then shower money on Jaana. She was a wonderful dancer with a lithe nubile body. She’d thrust her taut bosom with attitude. Men went crazy over her duet performance of *Choli Ke Peeche* and *Tu Cheez Badi Hain Mast*. On both the numbers, Jaana and her partner Jogi, the transvestite set the stage on fire.

After the bar shut, A.T and Jaana would drive all the way to Juhu and check into one of the sea-side hotels. In the room Jaana would start the water in the tub and undress. Naked, she’d walk over to the bar and fix herself a stiff whiskey. She’d then saunter back to the bathroom and slip into the tub. A.T would follow suit. Then after a drink in the bath the twenty something couple would let their imaginations soar.

Jaana and A.T had a great time in bed. But there was more to Jaana than just her sexy body. She was confident, spoke well and kept abreast of the news. She was like A.T in that sense. She did not care about the injustice of her background. Instead she knew exactly where she was going. A calculative girl, she had judiciously invested her money in real estate in Virar and Mira Road. It would pay for her career in fashion after her career as a bar dancer ended. Jaana was 25, and aware that a bar dancer’s career was now going downhill.

Jaana had already looked up The British School of Millinery and other fashion colleges in London. Determined to study hat making, she’d train herself as a milliner. “Just like Coco Chanel,” she would coo to A.T in their post coital conversations.

And A.T had a penchant for ambitious women; those who were passionate about their craft and fought tooth and nail to grow in life.

But tonight, was not the night for Carnival or any other dance bar. Being spotted indulging in revelry tonight, would spell trouble for the gang.

A.T knew the modus operandi of the cops. Once a major gangster got killed they would stalk his rivals. While orchestrating the Police Encounter of Usman Ali, he had not made the mistake of underestimating ACP Pathak. A.T knew that Pathak and his strong network of uniformed officers and shady informers would be hot on the trail of the only prominent gang of Mumbai underworld now.

The gang whose chief was A.T and its core lieutenants: Mistry, Munawar and Hakim in that specific hierarchy. Then there were the book-keepers, shooters, foot soldiers that Hakim interacted with on need-to-know basis. Who amongst them would change sides, or be informers –A.T did not know.

“Let’s not celebrate tonight. The *tholyas* will surely be looking for us in dance bars all over town.”

Mistry knew that A.T had a point. However, the night was special. Celebrating their success two weeks later would not be the same as having a good time at that very moment. A fortnight later they would be in the thick of something else.

“How about renting a bungalow in Panvel? With a ‘Natasha’ for each of us?” asked Mistry suddenly.

‘Natasha’, is the slang for Caucasian prostitutes who hailed from countries like Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Serbia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Their white skin gave them an edge over the models and movie starlets in the flesh trade of Mumbai’s champagne set. Not everyone could afford a Natasha as it was an expensive affair. They were exclusive.

“A Natasha for me Mistry Seth?” asked Munawar excited.

“And me too!” demanded Hakim. He suddenly seemed to have found a voice.

Even though A.T was not the one to show much emotion, he was excited at the prospect of a Natasha. Mistry could see that in his eyes.

“I will call Pappu,” said Mistry. He got up from his seat and punched the digits of his mobile. Putting the phone to his ear he said, “Hello? Haan ... Coordinator Saab?”

Saying this Mistry walked away. Dilawar and Hakim sniggered. A.T looked on as he did not get the joke. Munawar explained, “Pappu is a pimp. You name it A.T Bhai – from Kamathipura to Five Star Hotels to private parties – he is an established pimp. But he slapped me when I called him *bhadva* jokingly. He likes being called *Coordinator Saab* and is very serious about that. Otherwise he is a chilled- out guy.”

Mistry came back excited. “It’s done. 4 Natashas’ are on their way to a Bungalow in Panvel.”

And within minutes, the gangsters were in a sparkling new Mitsubishi Lancer zipping towards Panvel.



“He was justified in slapping you, Munawar. Look how Coordinator *Saab* has organized not just the women –but waiters, whiskey and wine,” said A.T as he took a seat in the sprawling hall.

They were in the bungalow, with a couple of waiters who were fussing around them. One was fixing drinks, the other made sure everyone took their seats, the third was whispering in Mistry’s ear.

Soon, when all the four men had settled with a drink each, lights dimmed and lilting notes of music started to play.

4 White women each wearing shimmering hot pants and a bustier in electric chromes of blue, gold, pink and green respectively paraded down the hall. Out of the four, the one in green was a plump older woman probably in her late-forties. She bustled her bulk towards Mistry.

The most stunning of them was a model dressed in a gold set. She sat next to A.T. Taking his hand in hers she ran it over her face, neck, moving down all the way to her belly.

Kissing his palm gently she stood up. Lights dimmed further down and all A.T could see were glittering ensembles moving breezily to the music.

Within minutes ‘Brazil’ started to play and the women romped to the foot tapping beats of the 1999 Vengaboys hit!

During the dance, A.T’s girl came back to him. This time she had a huge sip of his alcohol. Then pulling his face to her, she kissed him. The drink slipped back in his mouth. Single Malt had never tasted better!

During the wee hours of the night the men were escorted by the ladies to their respective bed rooms. No one got out of the room until late afternoon.

Satiated and hung-over, the gang headed back to New Uran Hotel late in the evening. Seated in the back seat of the Mitsubishi Lancer, Munawar and Hakim bantered softly.

Mistry hung up after talking to a film distributor regarding overseas rights for his magnum opus. He looked at A.T who was driving. "So? How was last night?" asked Mistry.

A.T smiled.

"First time with a Natasha?" asked Mistry with glint in his eyes. "There is something about these white girls, no?"

Yet again, A.T smiled. What could he say? Whilst his sex fete with a white girl, he had fantasized about his brown girl, Ritika.



| 16

Ek Don Teen
Chaar Paanch Chey Saath Aaath
Nau Dus Gyraah Baarah Tera...

In his downtime, Pathak enjoyed watching any film that had Madhuri Dixit in it. As the 1988 Bollywood blockbuster **Tezaab** played on cable tv for the umpteenth time, the phone lines in his cabin refused to stop ringing. Lowering the volume, he attended to each call. For everyone wanted to congratulate him.

ACP Pathak had always been media's blue-eyed boy. But now he had become the hero of the masses. Journalists pressed for reactions and quotes. However, in all the phone interviews that he gave to the press he avoided the spotlight. Calculative, Pathak often quoted "under the supervision of my seniors, "the team achieved" etc. to avoid jealousy and politicking amongst his colleagues and superiors.

Jayant Dahanuker called too. The minister mentioned a promotion. And just as he hung up, Pathak's mother phoned him. She attributed his success to the new woman in his life. "I was telling you for such a long time! See how marriage has brought you luck! Thank me son after all, I chose her for you," the mother said with pride. Grabbing the phone from her doting mother-in-law, his wife dismissed the claim and told him that they should do a short trip to the hills. "While you need a break, I need my husband," she said.

All this made Pathak happy but niggles in his gut refused to fade away. In fact, they augmented as minutes passed. There was a piece of puzzle that Pathak could not put his fingers on... Something was amiss. Something about Usman's death did not make sense at all ...

"Teri zindagi aur maut ka phasla Munna ke chakoo ke dhaar sey zyaada nahin hain."

Anil Kapoor code-named Munna, threatened a defaulter in his opening line of the celluloid extravaganza.

Pathak shut his eyes and focused on his breath.

Minutes later he called for the transcripts of the phone conversation he had intercepted earlier that year. He started to read the conversation, between Khalif Ahmed and Babban Mistry:

Phone call from Khalif Ahmed to Babban Mistry on 20th January 1999 at 10:00 P.M IST

Khalif: Babban, the *mezbaans*, my hosts are planning to send ammunition into the country.

Babban: Ok-kay...?

Khalif: They haven't told me yet, inside news is to give the deal to Usman.

Babban: Usman Ali?!? *Kyon?*

Khalif: His network on the coast is much stronger than ours. And the second reason is that they keep me on the edge. So that I don't get too comfortable. It's just politics. Listen, there is a lot of money involved. **A lot of money.** And I want it all for us.

Babban: No problem I will put Hero on the job.

Khalif: No. Don't do that. If the *mezbaans* get to know I got rid of Usman they will throw me out. I will never hear the end of how one *Bhai* killed another of the same ilk. We have to do something. But I must get this contract.

Babban: Its dangerous business, if I get caught here it's the end of me.

Khalif: The whole world is doing it Mistry, and you will get 10% in your personal account on every deal

(pause)

Babban: Look, let me step down and promote Hero to take my place.

Khalif: Why would I do that? No way! That shooter can't run my company.

Babban: He is not just a shooter. He is a damn good shooter with a great brain. Probably the best in the world. I will step down. You bring him in my place. Give him the Usman contract. He is too sharp. He will come up with something I am assuring you. After Usman is gone you can ask him to do the imports. Give him so much power that if something goes wrong he will take the fall.

Khalif: what do I say to him?

Babban: Nothing, we give him 3 contracts. 2 big fish and plus one attempt.

Boss Khalif: What do you mean?

Babban: You had a difference of opinion with Virendra Saxena right?

Khalif: But I don't want to kill him.

Babban Mistry: Scare him. We will ask Hero to target him. Then slip the news to a police informer. You will kill 2 birds with one stone. Saxena will be scared and will do exactly what we want from him. And Hero gets arrested.

Khalif: How does that help?

Babban: He prides himself in doing a clean job without leaving clues. So, he'd be angry at himself after his arrest. Then we tell him Usman gave the lead. It's my job to get him out. Bhimani is a friend.

Khalif: Hmmm...go on...

Babban: You make him the chief of Mumbai asking me to step down. I have seen Hero watch Lifestyles of The Rich and Famous on Star Plus. Give him a plush home. I have seen cook books in his little room.

Khalif: *Kya?* Cook Books?

Babban: Never mind, you listen to The Plan. Give him a swanky kitchen...everything he likes. And keep feeding him with how he needs to get rid of Usman Ali. He will. He has to. Once Usman is out you have nothing to worry. Next, he will do your imports with yet another out-of-the-box strategy. This is The Plan.

Khalif (laughing): *Saala!* You don't have evil in you – You Are Evil. So then basically you mean that he will have to go? Hello...Can you hear me? –

(Line unclear)

Mistry: Your line has been clear all the way. So, I was saying let us go ahead with The Plan. This way there is no scope of backfire and yes, he will have to go.

Khalif: Great! If it works out... *Inshallah!* Keep me posted.

Pathak shut the file.

Things fell into place. So 'Hero' that they kept mentioning was A.T. MLA Lalit Apte, Mohan Ráswe were the 'big fish' orders from Babban Mistry to trap him. The plan was to kill Usman without Khalif's gang getting involved so that Khalif's religious patronage does not point fingers at him. Then ship in weapons of mass destruction into the country. The idea was to make A.T Pradhan the face of the gang while Babban Mistry would escape to be with Khalif.

But what about A.T? From years of reading crime psychology, interaction with hardened criminals and offenders, from his exchange program with FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit in Virginia – Pathak knew that every criminal either carried an inherent gene or was raised in an environment that drove him to crime.

After all, A.T Pradhan was educated, well-spoken and sophisticated. Though it was hard for Pathak to admit, he had liked the young man when he interrogated him after the arrest. Had he got more time with A.T, Pathak would have done a psychological profile of A.T, just the way they did in the FBI. But he was bailed out the very next day.

Who was this man? Where did he come from? And most importantly... where was he going?

As Pathak thought hard, involuntarily he increased the volume of the TV.

On-screen, Inspector Gagan Singh played by Suresh Oberoi asked his colleagues, "*Main janna chahtaan hoon Mahesh Deshmukh aakhir Munna kaisey bana?*"

The universe was echoing Pathak's thoughts.

| 17

June 1974
Hussaini Chawl, Byculla
Mumbai

“Good Education is the only tool for *people like us*,” said Dr. T.S Pradhan, A.T’s father, to the five-year-old A.T. He was ready to leave for his first day at St. Andrews High School in the heart of Byculla. *People like us...*

Little A.T did not understand what that meant but something about those three words reeked of inferiority. ‘*People like us*’ were imprinted in the fertile mind of the five-year-old. He did not know why, but he knew that he never wanted to be “*people like us*”.

His father was a general practitioner who had a small dispensary down the road. His patients were the impoverished working lower class - mill workers, tea stall owners, vegetable vendors and their families. Many of them had poor health and no money. Very often Dr. Pradhan had to waive off their medical fees.

People in the *chawl* looked up to Dr. Pradhan and his family. Despite living in a one room dwelling alongside the workers, Dr. Pradhan worked hard and had dreams of sending his son abroad to study. A.T was the only boy in the *chawl* who went to an ‘English Medium School’, a status symbol for lower income groups back in the 1970s.

Very soon his strong father started to lose weight. He got weak and sickly. He had a persistent cough. Within a span of three months his father was less than half his size, relegated to the bed most of the time.

A.T started to overhear words like ‘radiation’, ‘advanced stage’, ‘cancer’ whispered in hushed tones. Days later, the five-year-old accompanied his parents to the Tata Memorial Hospital which specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of Cancer.

He was overwhelmed by the volume of people there. Little A.T was crushed by human bodies as they walked to the admission counter. He started to suffocate, and thought he was going to die. He clung to his weak father. Then a distraught woman from a remote village pushed A.T to the side in order to get ahead. It wasn’t her fault really. The hospital which offers the best treatment for cancer at subsidized rates attracts people from across the country. On any given day, it is like a railway station teeming with humans and hope.

Suddenly the five-year-old wanted to get back at the lady who had pushed him. He left his mother’s hand and started making his way towards the family. He could feel the tension and an overpowering urge with every step forward. He was out to push the lady. His mother tried to call him back but nothing could stop A.T in the moment. As soon as he reached the lady he stood in front of her and with all his might he pushed her. She toppled on her ailing sister, not knowing what had hit her. A.T kept staring at the lady. Stunned, she asked, “*kya hua beta?*”

A.T did not say anything but now he could sense the tension in him ebb away. When his mother approached the boy, she held him and asked what happened. A.T burst into tears. He cried. “I want to go home... Take me home. I don’t want to be here.” The boy was scared and a tad guilty too.

Those were the first signs of border line impulse control disorder- a psychological make-up in which the individual, with or without provocation cannot control a compulsion. However, A.T’s family had more urgent issues at hand.

Hurriedly the mother tried to pacify her crying son. “Ssshhh...my son. This place is the only hope for *people like us...*”

People like us... A.T looked at his mother. She was helpless. *People like us...* the words reeked of powerlessness.

And then another surge of human traffic separated him from his mother who had jostled ahead to get his father's forms while he and his father waited.

At the end of the day the family quietly entered their one room dwelling.

Mother sat Father down and gave him some water. She then beckoned A.T to the *mori*, a tiny square inside a *chawl* that is used for washing humans and chattels, and washed him quickly.

She'd usually sing popular songs like *Echak Daana Beechak Dana, Daney Upar Dana*, when she'd get A.T ready. But now, she was unusually quiet. After the wash, she briskly moved about the *otta*, cooking up a frugal *khichdi* in the pressure cooker. Her actions were hurried, just like a rat.

Once she put the cooker on the gas, she sat down next to his father. His mother put her hand out to A.T. He came close to his parents. His mother hugged him tightly and burst into tears. The father tried to calm her down but he got into a bout of cough yet again. This time the mother did not reach out to pat his back or hand him water. She was consumed in her own grief. Then in between sobs she blurted "I can't. I can't do this by myself. I need help. I can't, I am sorry," she cried. The father looked helplessly at her. The doctor had said it was too late. That he had only 6 months to live.

"Take him home and make him comfortable," was the only solution the oncologist had to offer.

A week later A.T and his parents were in a State Transport Bus roaring its way towards Nasik- A.T's mother's hometown. Unlike a small family in a one room dwelling –his maternal home was expansive. There were plenty of *Mamas* and *Mamis* swarming around like flies. A.T also had cousins his age.

A.T's family was given Sameer *Mama's* room. Sameer *Mama*, a bachelor was a Lieutenant in the Indian Army. Those days he was posted in Nathula, Sikkim.

Though A.T enjoyed the company of his cousins and new friends in New English High School – he missed the big city.

He missed the close-knit family they once were. He missed his strong father and his doting mother, the one who sang songs while doing her

chores happily. Now she was a serious care-giver who worked relentlessly trying to assuage the torture called Cancer. There was no room for song, no room for happiness.

There was just pain. Different stages of pain. On good days there was discomfort. Regular days were marked by soreness, then throbbing, at times, stinging. Most of the time there would be a relentless ache that refused to ebb away. In the worst moments the father groaned in such agony and desperation that 6-year-old A.T wished him dead.

Months later, after a violent fight against Cancer, his father died.

The six-year-old felt nothing. There was no sorrow, no remorse. His mother thought that perhaps being a child he did not understand the gravity of death. She let him be.

Then the widowed Sameera Pradhan, decided she would stay with her brothers in their family home, with ‘her people’. Her family supported her decision.

Everyone was good on the face of it, but covertly A.T found his mother taking care of the large joint family. She was always in the kitchen toiling over oversized, over-cooked meals for ‘her people’. A simple *dal-bhaat* was never enough. The family needed 2 *subzis* – one dry, one in curry, one *dal*, something sweet – all fresh and homemade. Meals were never repeated. From jams, to ketchups to *laddoos* everything was prepared at home. Hot breakfast, hot lunch and hot dinner had to be prepared by his mother Sameera and the cook.

Moreover, the *Mamis* would order her around. “Oh, but my husband does not eat *bhindi*...can you make something quick so that your brother does not go hungry... how about *kobi* with some mutton in it?”

“Of course! Said his mother with a servile smile “that won’t take me too long”.

“That’s so sweet of you,” said the *mami* and sauntered away.

Or

“Iron my *salwaar kammez* please.”

At one time, 7-year-old A.T wanted to show his mother a windmill he had made for Craft Class. He asked her to come to their room. But mother had no time. He started to cajole her affectionately, “Come na ...please ...just for one minute”. But the mother was too busy grinding

the elaborate Kolhapuri *masala* for mutton curry. He held his mother by her waist and dug his face into her saree which smelled of a mélange of masalas.

“Please come.”

“Shh...Not now...once food is ready I will see it. Go now.” Out of the blue A.T felt a stirring. It was followed by a strong inexplicable surge of rage. It kept increasing as it stormed to his room and crushed his craft project into pieces. In cold rage, he started kicking it to bits and only stopped when the hitherto windmill was a mass of mess. And then all of a sudden, he felt relief.

When his mother came to the room she was aghast. Taking her son in her arms she said, “What is this? You know na I have to cook for the family. Couldn’t you wait? *Beta, people like us* have to adjust.”

“What do you mean *people like us*?!” he cried and stormed out, leaving his mother to clear his mess.

Two years after his father had passed away, ‘her people’ could no longer put the mask of niceties on. Instead, they thought they were doing their widowed sister a favour by giving her a home to live in, free food on the table, and sending her son to school.

Being a non-income-generating-widow-with-a-son-in-tow, her status was the lowest of the low in the family hierarchy, just above the servants.

Growing up, A.T saw through the filthy politics of a large joint family. He hated them for their craftiness.

The best chicken pieces were for the Family. A.T was often given the neck piece and the leftovers to eat. His mother had the curry, sometimes there would be a potato. And they were helpless, for they could not complain. No one said anything unpleasant. Everyone smiled to the face and served them the leftovers. The mother said nothing. After all she and her son had to adjust. *People like us...*

Despite having cousins his age, despite playing cricket in the compound with them, A.T often felt like an outsider. He felt he did not belong.

Until one day in his room, Sameer *Mama’s* room, he discovered James Hadley Chase. The break-neck speed of his thrillers engulfed A.T into the world of New York gangster culture, thefts, insurance frauds and beautiful women. The dysfunctional family of the hero of JHC’s novels made A.T realize he was not alone.

From Chase he moved onto Wilbur Smith and then Sidney Sheldon.

Though he was too young for pulp fiction, the world of novels soaked him in. He knew there was a world out there that was far more exciting, engaging and glamorous than his own. A world where the bad guys had the money, fast cars and hot women. They led exciting lives till they died. Moreover, the bad guys died fast. One hit of the bullet and gone! A.T comprehended there was no better way to die than a bullet hit, aimed accurately on strategic parts of the human body. Like the head. A.T wanted to be that bad guy who had wealth, whiskey and women and most importantly that guy who died quick. *'Because when death comes knocking, it better be quick, over and done with'* had become A.T's fanatical conviction after seeing his father's prolonged unfair agony.

And one day, Sameer *Mama* came back for a Diwali break. The family clustered around their family favourite. Being the youngest he was pampered by the brothers and Sameera. A tall powerful army officer, Sameer *Mama* was a people magnet.

A.T, stood behind his fawning relatives and wondered what it was about Sameer *Mama* that made him so popular. Was it charm, was it tact, or the charisma of the uniform?

A.T, now 9, surmised it might be the uniform. It added power to the personality. And that's what he noted about Sameer *Mama*. Power. A.T wanted that power.

After he had met his family and before meeting the servants, Sameer *Mama* stopped at A.T and his mother. He gave Sameera a saree and A.T, a toy gun.

"I want a real gun. Like the M1-Garand or an Avtomat Kalashnikova" said A.T abruptly. He wanted to show off how much he knew about the real stuff he had picked from novels.

Ironically in 1979, the nine-year-old knew about the AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle before the rest of the country did, post the 1993 serial bomb-blasts.

The joint family was aghast. But Sameer *Mama* was unperturbed. He put his hand on the boy's head and patronized, "If you want to use a real one you should join the NMS."



NMS or the National Military Scouts was an ancillary training platform, a fabulous grooming opportunity for those who wished to pursue a career in the armed forces.

As a cadet, when 13-year-old A.T held a rifle in his hands he felt a strange sense of belonging. To A.T, the rifle was an extension of his hands. He loved the metallic smell of the cartridges. He enjoyed just being on the range even if it meant waiting for hours to get a chance to shoot. On the range, he felt he was meant to be.

Nothing mattered anymore. The filthy politics of a joint family, his mother not giving him attention, *people like us...* All petty issues ceased to exist. He was no longer like them. With his rifle, he was powerful. Though he shared it with other cadets, it was something he could call his own.

His grades started to improve and he felt he belonged. Finally, A.T had found his calling.

Couple of years later, Sameera died suddenly. She had malaria, was admitted to the hospital and just died, out of the blue. The first thought that came to his mind when the doctor broke the news was, '*Thank god she did not suffer the way my father did.*'

He held his mother's corpse close and kissed her forehead. And for the only time in his life A.T broke down. For now, he knew he had no one to call his own.

The trauma of his mother's death at 15 was assuaged on the range. Once he was there he forgot everything.

A.T spent more time on the range than he did at home or in junior college. He was garnering accolades as a shooter. Months after the death of his mother, he was gearing up for the Maharashtra State Zone Rifle Shooting championship.

At home they were jealous. Because A.T had started to exude an aura of a calm powerful warrior.

Firing a target released volumes of adrenaline that could send the shooter into a tizzy. A.T taught himself how to calm down. He practiced the art of observing his thoughts. He watched them float in and struggled to not attach his mind to any one thought. At first it was a challenge.

But over time his simple daily practice taught the teenager some powerful lessons. That everything was in a state of transition. Nothing was permanent. Thoughts, feelings, emotions and relationships were always in a state of flux. Even the so called 'truth' altered with time and convenience. Getting hooked onto any one thought or emotion was unnecessary. On the other hand, what was important was living in the

'Now'. To be present. To be mindful. To be calm and yet alert. After all, shooting was all about controlling one's mind..

As he read and learnt more, he became aware of his childhood outbursts. That it was a clinical case of borderline impulse control disorder. But by channeling his energy into a sport and meditation he could control it. Moreover, he hadn't had any outbursts in years now.

He taught himself to visualize his goals; watched himself perform. He focused on his breath. And one day he learnt to stop his mind on a single point of focus.

A.T was so consumed honing his skills that the family's covert comments, the snide remarks, the ignoring of his win at the district level – made no difference to him.

When Sameer *Mama* got back from his post, he was told about A.T's obsession with the sport. *Mama* placated the irate family, "I will talk to the boy. But why are you guys so depressed? We should be proud of him!"

And indeed, Sameer *Mama* was. He took A.T out for dinner. The elders in the family excused themselves on some pretext or the other. A.T's cousins wanted to go as they would get a chance to partake of a drink or two with Sameer *Mama*, something that was looked down upon by other family members. But by the end of the evening somehow it was just Sameer *Mama* and A.T who stepped out to dine.

They went to the Army Club. Sameer *Mama* ordered for an Old Monk and A.T did the same for he did not know better.

"Cheers to your success. I am so proud of you!"

"Thank you *Mama*. This is a great place."

"It could be yours if you join the army."

"Yes...but I want to be a shooter."

"On the border you will be shooting for real. It won't be controlled as it is on the range A.T."

Sameer *Mama* took a large swig of his drink and came straight to the point. "How do you plan to make a living? ...You can't keep living off..." Sameer *Mama* could not finish the sentence. He took another swig.

A.T was at a loss for words. He was so engulfed in his passion that larger questions like earning a living had not bothered him. And Sameer *Mama* was right. As a family 'they' could not keep feeding him. 'They'

had done their bit for their nephew. ‘They’ had paid for his education, food and clothes. Despite physically not being around, Sameer *Mama* had encouraged him to join the NMS, he had set up a small bank account for A.T to withdraw money for his Cadet Camps and other course related expenses. Though he got the worst pieces of food, or was served leftovers of the previous day, his *Mamis’* had put food on his plate after his mother passed away.

A.T barely drank or ate. Sameer *Mama* kept talking about career options in the Armed forces or the Indian Police Service. But A.T did not want to be a cop. All he wanted to be was a shooter. He was training hard for the upcoming state championship. However, in the moment, he did not mention it.

But “*people like us*”, as Sameer *Mama* summed up the dinner, “We don’t have the luxury of indulging in a sport. We need to earn a living.”

A.T could not sleep that night. He thought hard. And then in the dead of the night, he got out of bed and collected all his stuff. He made sure he packed his certificates, his medals, his college identity card; he collected his SSC mark sheet and School Leaving Certificate. He treaded softly down the stairs, to Sameer *Mama’s* room and searched around for his wallet. Removing all the currency notes, he stashed them in his pocket. He looked at *Mama* and gently put his palm on his forehead. And then he tiptoed down the hallway and opened the main door. He walked away without looking back.

He was on his way to Bombay. In 1986 Mumbai was Bombay.

Despite applying for admissions mid-term, A.T, with his grades and NMS credits, walked into Shahji College of Arts, Science and Commerce. It was a nondescript college in Dadar but was affiliated to the NMS and was used for training.

Though the college was not as reputed as St. Xavier’s, Sydenham or Jai Hind – it gave him the platform he needed to pursue rifle shooting. Also, NMS had a quota that needed to be filled at the international level. And that’s where A.T wanted to go. To represent the country in international shooting championships.

A.T got himself a part-time job as a sales representative for a multinational company that sold vacuum cleaners. They needed smart, preferably good-looking executives to represent them. A.T fit the bill to

the T. After he made sure that he had a source of funds A.T put all his energy on the shooting range.

Over months, A.T made few acquaintances and many admirers, especially women. But he restrained from parties and socializing as it would hamper his training the next day. However, secretly he enjoyed the “table-fan” effect he had on women when he walked past.

Tall and lithe, his movement was quick. He had started to ooze that deadly combination of self-confidence and power. He enjoyed the company of books and Hollywood films shown in Metro, Sterling and Eros. A.T discovered that he loved to see Bombay on foot. He walked down Dadar Parsi Colony, the Maharashtrian Wadies of Girgaon, found a community of Chinese dentists and shoemakers in the red-light area of Falkland Road. On foot, he discovered a fascinating metropolis teeming with indigenous sub-cultures. But all this was possible only when he took a break from training. His focus was razor sharp. He wanted to participate in the upcoming National Championship and then represent India as the Seoul Olympics.

With focus and hard work, A.T was sure he'd get selected. Because in rifle shooting, selection was mathematical. It depended on the number of targets scored. This left little, practically no room for politics or favouritism.

On the other hand, A.T was not blind to the knowledge that shooting had its share of negatives. It was an expensive sport to begin with. Those who did not own a gun, spent more time waiting on the range rather than practice. Equipment was basic and common. For instance, a shooter required a jacket tailored for his body type. The jacket given to A.T had been used over the years and did not snug his lanky frame. Owning a gun meant importing one. Even if one had money, from application of import license to getting it through customs- the entire process was paralyzed by red-tape. Sponsorships came by with great difficulty and luck, usually after the shooter had proved his mettle in international games.

But none of these deterred A.T from his goal. He was clear that he wanted to spend the rest of his life shooting.

From coaches, to other shooters to random people in his office- A.T asked if anyone knew of any prospective sponsors. He always got no for an answer. But he did not give up. He kept asking.

Then one evening, after practice one of the coaches took him aside.

-Someone had approached me to start a rifle training institute. The man had a lot of money.

-What was the man's name? Can you put me onto him?

- I don't know him, I don't know of him and he seemed fishy... something was not right about the man. I said no immediately.

-I don't care. Who is he?

-His name is Babban Mistry.



On 3rd February 1987, a year before the selections for Seoul Olympics, around 5:30 PM, at Casbah, the popular inn that served beer and 'quarter pegs' on Hill Road Bandra, A.T met Babban Mistry for the first time.

Mistry introduced himself as a businessman who wanted to start a rifle training academy in suburban Mumbai. Without wasting time, A.T told him that he was looking for a sponsor and instantly Mistry agreed. A.T could not believe his luck! The usually restrained A.T started to smile as Mistry spoke about how he should focus on his training, hire a physiotherapist if needed and not worry about petty things like money.

Babban Mistry came across as a courteous Gujarati businessman who surprisingly knew about guns.

"So, what are the guns of your choice A.T?"

".22 Walther and Fienwekbau."

"Controlled Air Rifle Events?"

A.T sat up. He did not get what Mistry meant.

"Tell me, Mistry Seth, why would you sponsor me so easily?"

"I am not sponsoring you, I am investing in you. Go for your championship, win your medals, and then after it's all over I will call you."

"What if I run away?"

"You are a NMS cadet. Your word is sharper than your hit. We will talk about the academy once you are back from the games."

"Thank you for being so generous. I will help you set up a world class training academy I promise."

Mistry smiled as he removed a Tokarev pistol and slid it across the table. Fascinated A.T held it surreptitiously. He tried to smell it.

“Keep it,” said Mistry. A.T looked up and Mistry explained, “If you love it so much, you should keep it.”

“Do you have a license?”

“Not yet A.T. But it’s in the process, so in a week or so I should have the license.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me. I know people in the ministry. I have powerful contacts A.T.”

Any trained shooter knows better than to keep an unlicensed gun. But the gun was his only love. And his weakness too. It was the single reason for his being, it was his *dharma*. He felt alive with the weapon in hand. His rationale told him not to keep the gun. But he could not help himself and surrendered to his impulse.

In 1985, Khalif Ahmed had escaped India and was somewhere in South East Asia. He was busy collaborating with the other crime syndicates. To win them over Khalif needed to get rid of the thorns in their path. But it was not easy to reach high profile cabinet ministers, gang lords and wealthy businessmen. It was Mistry’s idea to have a trained sniper in their midst. Khalif thought it was too far-fetched. As usual Mistry asked Khalif to leave it up to him to find a sniper.

News of an ace marksman looking for a sponsor reached Mistry’s sharp ears. Instead of approaching him directly, Mistry sent his acolyte to speak to one of the coaches. The coach brushed him off, but thought he’d at least inform A.T about this prospect.

And that’s how, A.T met Babban Mistry.

Now Mistry’s job was to trap A.T...



His head held high, A.T’s stride was longer those days. He looked more confident than ever. He had a sponsor who would pay for his training, paraphernalia and had also promised to pay for a physiotherapist and sports-psychologist. Just like international shooters, thought A.T.

Moreover, A.T now possessed a gun. For a lark he carried it in the small of his back. The cold piece of metal felt good on his skin. He enjoyed it so much that he carried his gun everywhere he went. He wanted to test himself, how he'd react to situations knowing he had a gun on him.

When the sales head at his day-job was addressing the team, A.T smirked at the thought of pulling out his gun in the middle of the meeting. But he did not do anything about it. When his coach trained him, he wondered how his coach would react if he put the pistol to his head. When he was in a crowded bus he'd feel like simply pulling the trigger to scare the crowds. Armed with a pistol, A.T felt like a whole new person. A person who had more power than those around him. That sense of power was addictive, far greater than lines of cocaine.



It was a hot afternoon in the middle of May. The slow -moving traffic came to a standstill on one side of the road. Seated in the back seat of a taxi, A.T relaxed his tie and unfastened the top button of his shirt. He was with two other colleagues. The young men decided to share-a-cab from Worli Naka to Churchgate where they had to make cold calls for their vacuum cleaner.

An air- conditioned Contessa drove in and stood alongside the taxi. The three sales executives looked at the dark windows wondering how nice and cool it would be inside. All of a sudden 5 big built men just appeared out of nowhere and started banging the door of the Contessa.

Shell shocked the young men in the car looked on. No one moved. One of the 5 big men yanked a middle aged bald man out of the car. Suddenly A.T could feel a stirring in him. The men pushed the old man and he fell to the ground. The men then held him up by pulling his shirt and pushed him on the other side of the road. Uncontrollable anger began to fester in A.T. Fully aware of it, A.T started to breathe deep in order to calm himself.

When the uniformed driver tried to save his boss, another big man shot him in the leg.

The middle- aged man pleaded for his life but the 5 men were tossing him around. On the opposite side of the road, A.T saw a Maruti jeep. He was quick to deduce that these 5 men were gangsters and they were

kidnapping this rich man. On an impulse A.T started to open the door of the cab when his colleague stopped him.

“Don’t be silly A.T. *People like us* can only watch this *tamasha*.”

“I am not people like you. I never was and never will be,” saying this A.T got out of the taxi and on an impulse opened fire, shooting all 5 of them in their head.

In broad daylight 5 burly men collapsed dead on a busy road. And in that moment A.T felt a strange sense of relief.

Thoughts hammered through, *‘What a great way to die! This is how death should be. Why did my father have to suffer so much? The best way to die is a bullet hit accurately in the head. Because when death comes knocking, it better be quick, over and done with.’*

Hit by temporary insanity, the middle aged businessman started screaming and crying at the same time.

All of a sudden traffic started to move speedily. His shell- shocked colleagues stared at A.T till he disappeared from their line of sight.

Moments later when he came to his senses, A.T dropped his gun and ran into a one-way street. He had no idea where to go now. He just kept running...



Nothing could have made Mistry and Khalif happier. A.T had saved them the trouble of hatching a plot to trap him. Moreover, albeit unintentionally, A.T had saved a diamond merchant from getting kidnapped by Usman Ali’s henchmen.

Thereby continuing Khalif’s one-upmanship with Usman ...



| 18

Ritika was at A.T's for a "really-quick-working-lunch," as he had insisted. She was watching CNN when he sauntered in holding bowls with serviettes under each.

"Shrimp and pasta salad," he announced. Handing her a bowl, he sat beside her. Ritika took a large mouthful and chomped on.

A.T explained, "It tastes best if it's left to chill for 30 minutes but you are in a rush, so I hurried."

Ritika put the serviette to her mouth as she finished her bite. "Wrong profession A.T. You should have been a chef."

"But that's what I am. Every time we meet I cook something for you, right? I am a chef Ritika." He insisted playfully and took a bite of his lunch.

Ritika smiled and said nothing. Just as she pierced her fork into a chunky shrimp A.T casually suggested, "I have got something for you."

Ritika looked up, from her plate and stopped eating.

"You eat, I will just be back."

"Finish your food A.T. You know, I have noticed that you cook but hardly eat. C'mon eat first."

He patted her affectionately as he got up. While A.T went to his room, Ritika gobbled her well blended lunch. The shrimp was strikingly piquant against the mild pasta salad. Moreover, she was hungry and had to rush back to office. Finishing the last of her lunch she walked to the kitchen,

rinsed her bowl and kept it aside. She was so comfortable in his house. Taking a sip of water from the refrigerator she looked at her watch. It was time for her to leave now.

A.T swaggered towards her and took her hand. He then casually dropped thick wads of currency notes in her palm. Ritika frowned.

“For you. One lakh.”

Ritika stared at the bundle and then looked at him.

“Why are you giving me money?”

“When I am happy, say with Mistry or Hakim or Munawar, I give cash.”

“I don’t need your money or anyone else’s for that matter.” Putting the bundles on the kitchen counter, she started to walk away. A.T held her by the waist. “Don’t be angry, now.” Ritika did not reply but did not move either. He pulled her close. “Okay, let me guess what you’d need?” he cooed. Ritika blushed.

“What would you like?” he asked tenderly. Ritika looked into his eyes.

“If you don’t answer me, I will not let you go,” saying this he held her with both his hands. She blushed and hung her head low.

“Looks like you want to stay over,” whispered A.T.

Much against her will Ritika unlocked herself from his hold. She gently pushed him aside.

A.T moved and watched her as she brushed past. He was happy that she had refused the money.

As he walked towards the French Windows, he heard the door open. *Don’t go, please don’t go*, he begged silently. And then he heard the door shut. He closed his eyes and thought of her honest face. He imagined that he was kissing her large provocative eyes, and... just then...he felt her hand on his shoulder. Ritika had not left.

Restraint, A.T did not turn around. Ritika came into view and looked into his eyes. She felt she had always known this man. Over time. Lifetimes perhaps.

Slowly she put her face to his chest. It was very quiet that weekday afternoon and time ...it stood still.



Across the city, in Kaloti's life, time moved at break neck speed. Now that he had the funds, he was busy with the procedures to get his elder son into an under-grad program in an American University.

Apart from Pathak, Kaloti too had had his share of limelight. He was on the cover of Friday to Friday, a weekly current affairs magazine.

Now, seated at his desk he admired the cover even though Bhasker and Sulochana waited for him. Both wanted leads into Mumbai's under-belly. A gofer walked in with a tray filled with glasses of teas. He kept 3 on Kaloti's table. Pointing to the glasses, Kaloti offered tea to the reporters. Then taking his glass close to his mouth, he blew into it loudly.

"Any new information for us Kaloti *Saheb*?"

"Your office is the hot bed of scandal and you are asking me Bhasker?"

Saying this Kaloti slurped in a large volume of tea. Bhasker and Sulochana looked at each other puzzled. Realizing that they had missed the insinuation, Kaloti explained dramatically, "How did Usman Ali die? Yes, I shot him. In a real Encounter. Who was I with? ACP Pathak. After all he had the orders from the Home Ministry to arrest Usman. And why not. Pathak had enough proof of Usman's nefarious activities. Who gave the leads? Ritika Khanolker."

In the moment Sulochana did not mention that Usman's biggest illegal business- that of making counterfeit notes was busted by her. She had got the lead from Ritika...or then, did Ritika deliberately give away the story away ?

Kaloti took another gulp and finished his tea. "Who gave-what's her name-Ritika Khanolker...who is she anyway? And what would she be without a certain Mr. A.T Pradhan?"

Bhasker and Sulochana looked at each other but said nothing. They were too speechless to react.



At his apartment, A.T could not wait for his men to leave. Over a drink, he simply wanted to reminisce the magical afternoon he had spent with Ritika. But his raucous team was discussing cricket at the dining table as Babban Mistry inhaled steam. Abruptly A.T got up and said, "*Chalo* then, good-bye and good-night".

The banter stopped and Hakim & Munawar got up. Ignoring everyone Mistry covered his head with the *pancha* and hung it over the pot of steam. As Hakim and Munawar shut the main door A.T stared at Mistry, his head still covered. How he wished to dunk his head in boiling water and wring the *pancha* around his neck! Right away, A.T dismissed the thought.

“So, what have you thought of business?” asked Mistry calmly when he looked up.

Suspicion punched him in the gut. A.T sat down. He stared at Mistry as he covered his head yet again and looked up. Then Mistry spoke slowly, “The city is yours to play with. You can make loads of money. Far more than extortion, counterfeit even narcotics...”

“Come to the point. What are you talking about?”

“RDX, ammunition...And you don't have much to do. All you need to see is that we source a point of landing, and make sure that it reaches-

“No”

“It's a lot of money A.T! You can't even begin to imagine-

“No. And don't ask me again.”

“Can I ask why?”

“I am a criminal Mistry Seth ... and I am fine with that. But I am not some fucked up terrorist.”



| 19

The next day, Ritika checked her watch as she paced hastily down the corridors of Police Head Quarters. She was late for her meeting with Pathak. She had messaged him about the delay but he had not reverted. When Ritika saw Sulochana walk towards her, she stopped. “Thank God, I thought Pathak had left.”

“Worse. He has not come in. I have waited for over two hours.” Catching her breath, Ritika turned around and ambled alongside Sulochana. On her guard and unnaturally quiet, Sulochana, Ritika noticed, was not her upbeat self. To fill the unnatural silence Ritika yakked away, about how couple of years down the line, she’d like to pursue a 3 -month scholarship offered to young journalists by British Council to study broadcast journalism at the prestigious Cardiff University.

As soon as they were out of the precincts of Police Headquarters, Sulochana lit a cigarette. Cutting Ritika short she asked, “How much does A.T Pradhan pay you?” Ritika stopped and looked at Sulochana, her mouth slightly agape.

“Let’s walk. C’mon,” said Sulochana and resumed the amble. Dumbstruck, Ritika walked along. “Everyone in the media thinks that you too are on his pay roll like Nagarajan Iyer.”

“I have never taken any money from A.T,” said Ritika earnestly.

“A.T? No Pradhan?” repeated Sulochana. Ritika continued to look at her, realizing that she was calling a gangster by his first name in front of a senior colleague. Sulochana held Ritika’s arm. “Take care Ritika.”

Then, stubbing her cigarette, she walked across the pavement in the direction of the railway station.



A.T was in the middle of briefing Mistry, Munawar and Hakim about a debt recovery proposition from a *Gujarati* textile merchant, when his door-bell rang. A.T frowned for he was not expecting anyone that afternoon. He asked, "Did you call anyone Mistry Seth?" Mistry nodded, "No".

After a beat the bell rang again and yet again and it continued to ring. The men were on their guard. A.T looked at Munawar. Munawar walked stealthily towards the door while removing a gun from the back of his jeans. With his other hand, he gripped the knob, and peered through the peep-hole. Then dropping his guard, he looked back at A.T as he opened the door.

Mistry and Hakim were surprised to see Ritika as she stormed in and demanded, "A.T, I need to speak to you right now. Alone."

Hakim and Munawar looked at her aghast. Mistry being older and wiser showed restraint but was equally shocked at her over-familiarity. He had no clue about their clandestine rendezvous.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" asked A.T coldly.

"I am Ritika Khanolker and there are few things I wish to clarify. Right now. With you. Just you." She folded her arms.

Mistry started to leave. "No wait," demanded A.T. Then looking at Ritika he said, "These are my people and there are no secrets from them."

"I did not expect this from you A.T."

"Expect what?!" he snapped. He was a different person now that he was with his team. "You barge into my house uninvited, disregard my people, you don't bother asking if I have the time or inclination to speak to you. You better have a good reason for your insolence."

"Exactly my point. I am not one of your people. You don't pay me. I have never taken money from you Mr. A.T."

"So?"

"People are talking about us. I have been asked how much you pay me!"

“You needn't to come here for that. You could've called, you know.”

“What if they are tapping my calls?”

“What if they are following you here?”

Ritika paused. He had a point. Realizing her mistake, she snapped, “I hate you.” Turning back, she stormed out the door leaving his team as bewildered as they were when she had entered. Though Ritika and A.T were bickering over valid professional reasons, to them it seemed like a classic lover's tiff.

Despite their intelligence and maturity, most successful people have a self-destructive streak in them. She clicked the keyboard at such feverish pace that it would put a court stenographer to shame. Ritika was alone in her office that night typing her analysis of A.T. If questioned about her frequent visits, she would say that it was to get into the mind of a gangster.

A thick encyclopedia on crime psychology stood in the middle of her work station while a folder on A.T commanded the center spot of the desktop. However, Ritika could not stop thinking about A.T; how his warm breath tingled her skin, the effortlessness of their friendship, his voice and the way he looked into her eyes. *Thought dismissed! After all, he is a gangster. I am a reporter. We both are professionals.* And Ritika continued to type... *A.T speaks less and listens more...*

Her phone rang. The display flashed A.T. It was 10:30 in the night. Ritika glanced at her phone and turned her face to the screen of the computer. This was no time to answer work related calls, Ritika convinced herself. *And he was rude this morning ... Unlike other gangsters, A.T has clearly had international exposure. He likes Buddha Bar, cooks Mediterranean cuisine and has Single Malt –The Macallan, on the rocks.* She continued to type.

On his part, A.T had called to apologize. He knew he was rude but what could one do? She had barged in when he was working. And A.T did not want Ritika to mix with the likes of Mistry and Munawar. The reason he had shooed her away was because he was trying to protect her. Couldn't she get that?

Maybe she needed to be cajoled and pampered. He was going to sweet-talk her into coming over. Then he'd cook for her. Probably take her out for a drive. That was the plan. What was the big deal about the argument

anyway? They were...err...friends after all. And friends fight every now and then now, don't they?

But Ritika refused to answer the phone. She kept typing furiously. When her phone stopped ringing, she glanced at it. *'Get lost. I am never taking your calls again,'* she said to herself.

After a beat, the phone started ringing again.

"Good evening Mr. A.T. How may I help you?" Ritika answered the phone. She was at her professional best.

Shaken by her coldness, A.T was at a loss for words.

"Would you like to do a phone interview with Babban Mistry?" A.T lied without meaning to.

After all he too was a professional.



| 20

However successful, mature and intelligent we may be, all of us have a self-destructive streak. Our self-destruction makes us powerless, renders us helpless. It could be as overt as abusing food, alcohol or drugs. Or then, it could be insidious: like the quality of our thoughts, of the words we may or may not speak. It could lie in our manipulative tendency, malicious gossip or even the relationships we choose. After all relationships are not as honest as we'd like them to be. Whether we admit or not, manipulation, intrigue, greed, ego and deception are a part of relationships that we share with one another, but most dangerously - with ourselves.

Ritika Khanolker's choice of man was a self-destructive one. Despite knowing that A.T had used her as means to an end, that there were speculations about them too, despite knowing that any further association would be dangerous for her reputation – Ritika dropped everything to meet A.T late that night.

She knew she had no reason to be in his apartment. But the chemistry between Ritika and A.T was so torrid that she could not resist. Neither could he. There was no conversation, clarification or apologies from the moment they had met. There was just hunger for each other.

Nothing could stop them that night. There was no fear, no apprehension or guilt either.

In the darkest hour of the night, exhausted by lust, their bodies involuntarily bundled up in bed... and that's when the carnal jamboree came to an end.

They lay so close that one could feel the other breathe. Ritika did not want the moment to pass. A.T had never felt this connected to anybody before.

“A.T?”

“Hmm”

“Nothing ...”

“You love to call out my name, don’t you?”

“No A.T. I don’t like to call out your name A.T.”

He let out a small laugh and pulled her closer. So close that he could have suffocated her. But she did not mind. On her part, she had never felt this secure. In his arms, she knew she was safest.

“I don’t want to leave A.T.”

“Then don’t. Stay here for as long as you wish.”

Ritika raised her head and faced him. Suddenly she felt a surge of cool air-conditioning permeate through her nostrils. But, she preferred the suffocation of their bodies and nestled back into his arms.

“You are joking A.T.”

“No, I am not. Stay here. We will live together.”

“You bet!”

“What’s wrong Ritika?”

“You know na, people are talking about us.”

“I did not think someone like you would worry about people, Ritika?”

“They are not some gossip mongering aunties you know? These are people I work with. Journalists. They think we are...”

“We are what?”

“They think we are having an affair.”

“Well, aren’t we?”

Ritika paused to let the reality of the situation sink in. Biting her index finger thoughtfully she said,

“It’s not like you pay me ... you know.”

“You want to get paid for sex!?”

“Shut up,” she said slapping his head. “I meant I am not on your pay roll ...like...like Nagarajan Iyer is? Right?”

“Right” agreed A.T and then it was his turn to raise his head and look at her. “How did you know about Naga?”

“A good journalist never reveals her sources.”

“My baby is growing up.”

“I am not your baby.”

“All I know is that you are my own. I will always be with you Ritika. Always.”

She held him close. Minutes passed in warm silence.

“Marry me,” he said.

“What?!”

“I am serious,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes. “We will make a perfect couple. You go out into the world and make a name for yourself. I will stay at home. I am a great cook, I love plants and I am house-proud.”

“And once in while...like... just by the way...,” added Ritika, “You will step out and come back after having shot someone or the other.”

His mouth agape, A.T was at a loss for words as the irony sunk in. Suddenly, in his defense, he caught her arm and started to tickle her. She giggled, and guffawed as she squirmed around the bed. “Say yes! Say yes!” he demanded.

“Get lost!” she protested squealing.

“Why not?” he asked as he pinned her foot down and tickled it some more.

“Stop! Please Stop!”

“Only if you say yes to marriage!”

“Shut up A.T!”

“What are you doing in my bed? Eh? Using me for sex?”

“You are the one who deflowered me A.T!”

A.T sprang up to kiss her. She pushed him away. Not because she did not want to kiss him back, but because her mobile had started to ring.

She knew it was from home even before she checked the display. “*Haan Aai*,” she said gathering her composure. Her parents were worried because she had not taken their calls through the night.

“No...no...I am in office. I had to edit a very crucial story but the damn edit machine crashed. I did not know when I kept the phone on silent... Perhaps during the interview last evening... I might be home in the morning,” she fibbed further and hung up.

“You are such a consummate liar,” noted A.T.

“Yeah one has to do these things when one is with you Mr. A.T. You are a bad influence on good girls.”

“And what is a good girl like you, doing in my bed?”

“You forgot to add - stark naked. What is a stark naked good girl like me doing in your bed Mr. A.T?”

The couple burst into laughter and kissed for the umpteenth time that night.

“Ritika?”

“You like the sound of my name don’t you.”

“Yes Ritika. I love calling out to you, Ritika. And seriously, I’d like to do that for the rest of my life Ritika. Marry me.”

She stopped smiling and looked into his eyes. She did not say a word.

“What?” he asked flopping back on the pillows. He raised his voice, “Why won’t you marry me? I am serious. Why won’t you Ritika, when you just said you did not feel like leaving?”

“Why are you doing this A.T? You know this marriage talk is bull shit. It is never going to happen.”

“Why not?”

Ritika got off the bed and started to dress.

“Because it is not like you are some regular guy with a regular job. And I am not going to even ask you to change your ways because I know you won’t. Nobody does. Mafia is a one-way street.” She said as she buttoned her white shirt.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“You called me A.T,” she said as she started to wear her trousers.

“You could have said no.”

“You are just playing with my mind aren't you A.T? Even you know this marriage business is ridiculous. And you know what I think, it's best we don't meet. Because every time we do, we end up having a fight. Even if we are having a good time, you make sure to screw it up!”

Saying this she zipped up her pants, wore her shoes, picked her leather sling and stormed out of the room. A.T paced behind her and held her by the arm. “You are not leaving alone. It's 3:00 in the morning.”

“A.T you are hurting me, just let go, okay,” said Ritika staring at him. Looking deep into her eyes he dragged her to the bar, picked his car keys and walked with her to the door. When she tried to let go, he tightened his grip.

“Not a word from you Ritika. However bad I maybe I am going to make sure you reach home safe.”

“I hate you A.T!”

“I hate you too Ritika.”



After her spat with A.T, Ritika decided to focus on stories other than the underworld.

Exhausted after a long week of high drama, that Friday, when Ritika rang the door-bell to her home she had made-up her mind to sleep hard over the weekend. She had covered a riot, a resident doctors' strike and the suicide of a super-model all in one week.

The pressure of being linked with A.T was building up. One reporter on-field had spoken to her dismissively. Another senior made a snide remark about 'star' informers. Earlier in the week Bhasker was holding court with other reporters from office and had abruptly stopped when Ritika walked past. Ashu kept bringing up A.T's topic, so she avoided him and asked for another cameraman as well.

Now, when *Aai* opened the door for her, Ritika frowned. *Aai* was smiling beatifically. Ritika knew that her almost-always irritable mother smiled like that only when there were guests over. And Ritika was in no mood to talk to anyone now.

"Look who is here!" *Aai* announced happily.

When Ritika entered her flat, she saw Ashu and her father chatting away. Her mother had laid out tea and hot *poha* for the men.

"Wasn't it your day off?" asked Ritika without saying hi.

"I was running errands in the neighbourhood so I thought I'd drop by and say a quick hello" said Ashu.

Ritika knew he was lying. Ashu lived in a rented apartment in Andheri, a suburb in the North of Mumbai. What could he be possibly be doing in Girgaum, located in the heart of the city?

She stood by the open door and without removing her sandals, Ritika looked at the half empty plates of *poha* and then at Ashu.

But Ashu was in no mood to leave. "I came here to speak to you. Let's go for a walk," he said. The parents exchanged glances. From an easy-going chap, Ashu had suddenly become resolute. "Good-bye *Kaka*, bye *Kaki*. And thank you so much for feeding me. I was really hungry." As he wore his shoes he continued, "It has been a while since I had anything that was cooked at home."

Ritika's mother flashed a toothy grin, "treat this as your home *beta*. Do drop in even if Ritika is not around."

Ritika noticed that even her father had liked Ashu. "Take care young man," he said patting Ashu. Ritika folded her arms as she impatiently waited for the trio to finish with their good-byes.



Ashu had parked his bike just opposite Ritika's building. It was late evening, and there was a bustle of activity in Mangal Wadi as office-goers were returning home from Charni Road station.

Ashu leaned against his bike and asked, "Why are you avoiding me?"

"I am not. I have just been too busy."

"Right. Why have you not taken me on a shoot? Even when our names were put up on the roster, why did you request for a change?"

Ritika was quiet. She did not want to tell him that she knew what he wanted to talk about. She did not want to hear what people had to say about her. She knew they were speculating about her character. Wondering whether she had slept with A.T for information. Ashu looked at her. "Don't do it. Your career is just starting out."

"Don't do what? I have not done anything Ashu. I have not taken any money. If you check the source of my breaking news stories all calls were from unidentified numbers. I have worked with the police. I have never done anything immoral Ashu."

"I know you haven't. But why do you meet him so often?"

“For research.”

They both knew it was a lie. And it was Ashu who cleared the confusion for her.

“To a woman, what can be sexier than a man who is powerful, good-looking and forbidden? And to a man what can be more seductive than an intelligent woman who is young and beautiful. It’s the attraction of the forbidden fruit Ritika. It’s not love.”

“Of course not, Ashu! How can there be love? Is love even a remote possibility.”

He saw the pain in her eyes.

“Take care my friend. And if you ever need to talk –I will always be there for you. Don’t meet A.T for a while.”

Saying this Ashu sat on his bike and started it. Ritika looked at Ashu and said, “Ashu.”

“Yes?” he said expectantly. He hoped she would speak up and get it off her chest.

“Ashu, next time, please don’t drop in uninvited.”

“What?!”

“My mother is keen on getting me married. So, any guy is looked upon as a prospective groom. I am sure even now she is peering out of the window at the two of us.” Ashu glanced up to the building and sure enough, on the 5th floor stood Ritika’s mother, gazing at them through the window. She waved fondly. With a wry smile, Ashu waved back.



According to ‘The Butterfly Effect’, a butterfly flapping its wings in China can alter weather conditions in Florida. A great topic to discuss over drinks, it clarifies the fact that everything, every action in the world is interconnected.

On the Monday that followed, Ritika was typing a voice-over script when Ashu increased the volume of the television. She glanced up to footage of a burning truck, women weeping and a small child running in panic. Everyone in office: reporters, editors and camera people clustered around the TV set to watch the breaking news aired on India’s premier news channel- NNN, short for National News Network. In 1999

Breaking News was taken seriously unlike today where every story on-air is sensationalized as breaking news.

Black and white photographs of two men were then squeezed in, alongside the visuals of post explosion carnage. An incisive tone of voice informed, “In a secret operative led by the BSF, short for Border Security Force, Musa Muhammad Sharif and Faiyazuddin Masud the two terrorists of the Hizbul Mujahideen were bombed to death in a valley not very far from Drass. They had been living in a small village settlement. While the two terrorists died on the spot, 10 local men and two children are seriously injured. They are currently under treatment at an army hospital.

And then, on-screen Ritika Khanolker saw her idol Shimoni Mohanty. As the senior journalist gave her piece to camera on national television, Ritika quietly resolved for the umpteenth time, ‘*One day I will be in her shoes.*’

Deep down she knew that she’d make it big.

What she did not know, however, was that the news story playing out from an unknown valley near Drass would have ramifications echoed in Mumbai- with none other than A.T and Ritika Khanolker in the eye of the storm.



From his fat Motorola, a sharp blue light flashed in the darkness disturbing fellow customers. It was a bright November afternoon outside. However, the ‘Silence’ section of Pinky Bar was darker than an *amavasya* night in an impoverished Indian village without electricity.

A ‘Silence Bar’ typically operates during work hours; from 11: 00 AM to 7:00 PM. It is a place where a man walks in, sits and places an order for a drink to a male waiter. Then a girl comes in. If he is a regular he knows her by name.

The girl sits next to the man. He asks what she’d like to have while feeling her breasts. She tells him. Usually she asks for gimlet – a cocktail of gin, lime and soda. Politely the waiter takes her order as well and gets her ‘drink’ along with that of the man. Her drink is usually fresh lime soda sans alcohol. But the man pays for both their ‘alcoholic’ drinks. Seasoned visitors know the rules of the game and have no hassles paying higher rates for a cheaper non-alcoholic beverage.

The girl then; feels the man down and proceeds to give a hand-job. Both parties have their clothes on.

Now, while Suzy, a chubby middle aged 'girl' was in the throes of wanking off Babban Mistry, his phone screamed relentlessly in silence. Without even glancing in its direction, Mistry instructed Suzy to continue. In his spare time Babban Mistry loved getting hand-jobs from Suzy at The Silence Bar above Pinky Dance Bar. He had a thing for rotund middle - aged women with fat stubby fingers. Even when he visited brothels – whether it was Mumbai, Surat or on his trips to Bangkok and Amsterdam he always asked for older women. He preferred hand-jobs to sexual intercourse. It probably had something to do when he was growing up in Surat. He was often molested by his beefy aunt when she rubbed oil on the boy before giving him a bath.

The blue light of the display continued to flash ceaselessly. Irrate, Mistry reached for it and looked at the display. Pissed off, he asked Suzy to stop and took the call.

-“Boss! Where have you been? I have been trying to reach you for days!”

-“I was crossing borders by road. Bad network.”

-“I have bad news. A.T has said no.”

-“You know 2 of our leaders were bombed in Kashmir. That’s why I was called back to the city. For the *taaziyat*. The condolence meeting is in an hour. I will be meeting many senior officials there. I was planning to tell them about how I have the man who will get *sabun* into Mumbai. I could have got us huge business in the next hour. Hello?”

Mistry was quiet. Clearly, he was not aware of what Boss was saying. And the latter guessed as much. “You know what I like about A.T? The boy is abreast of the latest news. Never mind...I will call you back and we will discuss A.T. The boy has to say yes,” said Boss emphatically and hung up.

Mistry got up and went down to Pinky Bar. There was a lone man sitting at the cash counter. He was watching Rosa Cha’s collection at the Sao Paulo Fashion Week that was being aired on Fashion TV. Not that the man cared about *Cha* or beachwear or had any proclivity for fashion. He was simply ogling at bikini clad blonde models as they paraded in Cha’s luxury beachwear. The man got up when Mistry walked in asking

for the remote. Mistry kept shuffling channels till he saw shots of carnage on NNN. And as the news of the 2 militants getting bombed in a secret operation of the BSF played out, Mistry's evil genius began ticking.

An hour later, when his phone vibrated silently, Mistry did not answer it. Nor was he irritated by the ceaselessness of the blue flash. He knew it was Boss trying to get through. But nothing could disturb his hand job. Suzy was at it and soon Mistry escalated into an ecstasy he was familiar with since childhood. He was in no rush to speak to Boss. For in his mind he had worked out a plan. A.T had no option but to ship weapons of mass destruction into the inland.

○○○

| 22

“It takes practice but the best way to shoot is by holding the gun sideways,” said A.T as he picked up a Mauser. “Not because it looks cool when your film heroes shoot like that on-screen, but that way the target, bullet and the weapon are locked in a single straight line. It is not easy at all but if you practice you will get a hang of it.”

In the basement of a stalled construction in Navi Mumbai A.T was training new recruits. On a tottering wooden table Hakim kept 3 weapons – Tokarev, Mauser, and AK-47. Two meters up front were five sacks of sand piled one on top of the other.

Just then a white Maruti-van zoomed in. A.T saw Munawar in the driver’s seat. Babban Mistry got off as soon as the van screeched to an abrupt halt. “A.T,” he said as he paced towards him. A.T kept his gun on the tottering table and with a wave of the hand he dismissed the recruits. They walked away.

Hakim got two red plastic chairs and kept it by the table.

Babban Mistry sat down and glanced at Hakim and Munawar. Getting a hint, they walked away in the direction of the recruits.

“Boss was trying to call you. He could not get through to you. There is an order for a contract killing. It’s a high - level cop.”

“A Police Officer? Why would we do that?” asked A.T.

“Now you have a problem with that too? *Bachche*, we are running a crime syndicate not an NGO,” said Mistry breezily and added, “He is

Deputy Inspector General Digvijay Rana Singha. From my sources in the Home Ministry I found out that he is in Nasik.”

Despite being his hometown of sorts, A.T did not react. For him Nasik was just another place now. But something about this contract killing did not fall in place.

“Why are we killing this cop?”

“Since when have you started to ask questions A.T?”

“Since I became your boss Mistry Seth.”

Caught unawares, Mistry paused and after a beat he said,

“Look I got the orders from Boss. I am telling you his instructions. I have never asked for reasons. But if you must know, call Boss and ask him. You seem to have a problem with everything we do A.T.”

A.T looked at Babban Mistry as the latter got up and walked in the direction of the white Maruti van.

If A.T had it in him, he would not kill DIG Rana Singha. But he had already refused a very big assignment. While he was a criminal, a contract killer, someone who had no qualms smuggling contraband - he would not be a part of mass destruction. His conscience did not allow abetting the ghastly deaths of innocent citizens. However, two back-to-back refusals would prove detrimental to his status. It could black list him in the organization. And so, despite his will, A.T bit the bait.

At the outset he made a list of people who could give him more information of the DIG. From lawyers like Bhimani and his associates, to Home Minister’s office, to Kaloti and Nagarajan Iyer - he tried to deduce as much information as he could.

Here is what he got: A clean honest cop through his entire career, DIG, Dig Vijay Rana Singha had been posted in Drass over the past 5 years. A gold mine of ‘intel’ (short for intelligence) on infiltration, he was the one instrumental in getting rid of 2 important terrorist leaders. Days ago, he was transferred to his home ground Nasik on a peace posting as Deputy Director of the State Police Academy.

A.T, was now exhausted after umpteen calls back and forth to collate information. He thought of Ritika. He wanted to hear her cheerful banter. But then he remembered that the last time they met, they had had an argument. ‘*Time to make-up,*’ thought A.T as he dialed her number.

However, A.T could not get through to her. He tried her mobile many times after that. However, after a beep the line went blank.

Many attempts later he finally got through:

-“Where have you been my lady?”

-“Bad network out here.”

-“Where are you Ritika?”

-“Around”

-“A secret lover?”

Ritika did not react.

-“I am missing you already Miss. Why don't I come meet you? Tell me where can I come?”

A.T was getting inquisitive. Why was Ritika not saying anything? Why was her line blank? Where was she?

“Don't challenge me Ritika. I will find you,” said A.T and hung up.

The hunter was ready to hunt.



He was listening to Pandit Bhimsen Joshi on a tape-recorder when the bell rang. Ritika's *Baba* spent a large part of his newly-retired life listening to Indian Classical Music.

It was a peaceful post-tea Wednesday afternoon and the only disturbance was the clanking of tea cups as *Aai* washed them.

The doorbell rang again. *Baba* was cast under Pandit Bhimsen Joshi's transcendental spell. The bell rang once more, but *Baba* could not be bothered.

Irritated, *Aai* paced out of the kitchen muttering something under her breath as she passed by.

When she opened the door, *Aai* was transfixed. Gangster A.T was at her doorstep.

Unfamiliar to situations such as meeting- the- parents, on his part, A.T was awkward too. He tried to smile, backing it up with a hasty *Namaste*. *Aai*, however, kept staring at him, her mouth slightly agape.

Pt. Bhimsen Joshi continued to sing in the background. Then the volume lowered and *Aai* heard *Baba* address her in Marathi, “*kon aabe?*” Shaken out of her trance, Ritika's mother looked in her husband's

direction and then back at A.T. She then tried to mouth words but she seemed to have lost her voice.

Not getting any reaction from his wife, *Baba* came to the door. *Aai* moved back and scurried towards the kitchen.

“Good afternoon Sir. My name is A.T Pradhan,” said A.T trying his best to sound as normal as possible.

The usually laid back, bon vivant Mr. Khanolkar, was stern. “Yes?”

“Sir Ritika... Can I talk to you about Ritika?”

Ritika’s father nodded, “Urmila! *Paani aan*,” he said out loud to his wife and walked inside. As A.T entered the house, he took a quick look around the tiny flat. He noticed a family photo of the Khanolkar’s. Ritika was gawky pre-teen back then. A.T wanted to smile and say something but he knew that Mr. Khanolkar was staring at him. A.T looked at the father. The latter pointed to a chair. Quickly, albeit obediently, A.T took a seat. *Baba* sat down too, still staring at A.T. Realising that he was not going to say anything A.T spoke up.

“Sir I had given your daughter my first TV interview. She had promised to give me a copy of that. It has been almost 3 months since then. Last time she told me that the VHS copy is at home. Would you have any idea about it Sir? Every time I call her she says she is busy.”

“Don’t worry she says the same thing to us. Would you like some tea?” *Aai* confidently walked out with a plate of *sabudana khichdi* and a glass of water.

Now that her husband had taken over and invited A.T into the house, she treated him like any other guest. The father was aghast! All he had asked his wife to get was a glass of water.

A.T smiled uncomfortably as he picked the glass of water.

“*Arrey eat!* I had made it for Ritika when she left this morning. But madam was getting late for Nasik. She left without eating, as usual.... Should I get you some *dahi* with the *khichdi*?”

The father squirmed at his wife’s over friendliness. A.T nodded a no. He had registered the fact that she was in Nasik. He smiled warmly at the mother “Is she on a holiday *Kaki*?”

The mother made a face. “What holiday! She works on Sundays even. Some interview with a big police officer....*uff!* I forgot his name...”

“*Urmila!*” *Baba* glared.

“What is it?” she snapped at her husband and then softened, “I will get you *khichdi* too. He is a guest no. We have to be nice to our guests. *Aaho, Atithi Devo Bhava.*” Turning back to A.T she said, “DIG Digvijay Rana Singha!”

A.T sat up and broke into an involuntary smile. Ritika’s father nodded his head in dejection. *Aai* did not notice and continued to gossip.

“Ritika told us not to tell anyone but tomorrow night he is going to be on TV. So, what’s the big deal anyway?” she shrugged.

A.T could not stop smiling at *Aai*. It was true. He and Ritika, they had some strange karmic connection.



After he got out of Ram Niwaas, A.T called Kaloti. The police officer claimed that he had met the DGP on 3 occasions. A.T offered Kaloti 5 lakhs in cash for his 'cooperation'.

"Come to JJ School of Arts in plain clothes" A.T ordered. A.T then sourced an aspiring sketch artist from the premises of JJ School of Art. The three of them sat at Military Café in Flora Fountain. Over plates of *kheema pav*, Kaloti started to describe the DGP to the young artist.

By twilight, when the sketch was ready, Kaloti had to admit that it was a good as real. A.T glanced at the picture. Being a Sikh, the officer wore a turban. It'd make spotting the DIG easier.

Then it took A.T three 3 calls to find Ritika's whereabouts in Nasik. From his information, Team Ritika was booked in Room no. 105 and 106 of Hotel Sai Plaza, a basic 3 - star hotel. As he went about sourcing more data A.T felt the old adrenaline rush back when he used to plan his shoot-outs. The marksman in him was excited. But as the head of a crime syndicate, he knew that he had to be careful.

Now that he could not shoot himself, he had to plan in such a way that the shooter he'd hire would be as good as him. That was going to be difficult. Most 'sharpshooters' in the mafia could shoot only from a point-blank range. None of them were accomplished marksmen. In his mind, A.T ran through all the boys he had coached after he was promoted. Yes, there was a 19-year-old Manoj Morey. He was the only one who had mastered holding the gun sideways, a technique that left little room for mishaps. Moreover, Manoj Morey had a fabulous eye sight. Other than

these two merits there was nothing remarkable about him. Wiry, with oiled hair sleeked to a side parting and a small waist, he could pass off as a young office peon.

Manoj Morey was eager to work with A.T. And so, when A.T called Manoj he was so grateful that he nodded a holy 'yes' to everything A.T said.

Later that night, film star Veer Bhalla's first generation sports bike, the toast of 1999, Suzuki Hayabusa, disappeared from the garage of his high-rise on Mount Mary. By the time Veer Bhalla got to know about the theft and reported it, the Hayabusa, known to cut through the air, entered Nasik and stopped outside Hotel Sai Plaza.

It was 2:45 A.M. A.T got off, pulled out his helmet and from the knapsack removed old, unremarkable, slightly tattered bed sheets. He parked the Hayabusa in a nondescript by-lane and covered it with the old sheets. A.T then checked into Hotel Sai Plaza waited for Manoj and Hakim to arrive. They were driving a Toyota Lucida.

In his room now, A.T put himself in Ritika's shoes. It was clearly an exclusive interview else she'd have told him her whereabouts. There was a high probability that her interview could take place in the wee hours of the morning. That meant that he and his team had to be on stand-by. A.T wondered about what could be the best location for the interview. The Police Academy would be the obvious choice. However, being an exclusive, as this was, the interview could be done in a tight close-up without revealing the location. Which meant it could even be in Sai Plaza...

When Hakim dropped Manoj at Sai Plaza- A.T ordered Hakim to go to 'Point B' right away. He asked Manoj to catch a few winks. "I will keep a watch," instructed A.T. It was 4:00 A.M.

At 5:50 A.M when he saw Ashu walk to the white Maruti van parked in the compound, he shook Manoj.

A minute later, after making sure they had their mobiles, wallets and guns in place the two men paced down the stairs, noiselessly. As A.T handed the room keys to the sleepy receptionist, from the corner of his eyes, he saw Ritika join Ashu in the van.

The driver started the van and took off. As the automobile gained momentum on Trimbak Road, capriciously, lagging far behind were A.T

and Manoj Morey on the Hayabusa. Soon the media van dropped speed and took a right to enter the precincts of the imperial Maharashtra Police Academy.

A.T rode a kilometer away from the gates and stopped short. There was no way they could execute the assassination this time, thought A.T. They'd have to come back, as entering the Police Academy was not an option. Excited on account of following Ritika, he had acted on an impulse. But impulsive decisions had never worked for A.T. They'd have to track the DIG and come back another time. That was a reasonable thing to do.

But his intuition gently goaded him to wait. Perhaps he could gather a clue or two...

Torn between reason and intuition, at the outset, he parked the Hayabusa and covered it with the tattered sheets in his knapsack. Next, he made Manoj Morey stand away from the bike and pretend he was reading from the newspaper. Manoj Morey stared down at the picture of the DIG pasted in the middle of the newspaper. In his mind he meticulously ran through the sequence of events tutored by A.T.

On spotting the DIG, Manoj, keeping his Colt Python sideways would shoot him twice: one in the head and then the chest. Next, drop the gun, run to the Hayabusa and straddle across. They would zip out of the precincts of the city. In a deserted spot off the highway, they'd abandon the bike and set it on fire. Hakim would be waiting in the Toyota Lucida, with a changed number plate. That was Point. B. Manoj was thrilled. He was going to ride Veer Bhalla's Hayabusa in its fast fury and then burn it!

Two hours and thirteen minutes later when Ritika's media van left the premises, A.T turned around in an attempt to hide his face. He looked at Manoj. The latter slid his hand into the roomy pocket of his trousers to feel his Colt Python. It sent a rush of adrenaline through his body. He remembered A.T's lectures during training. "To be a good shooter, you need planning, precision and the right weapon. But moreover, you need a lot of patience." Now Manoj decided to wait for his first shot. All he had to do was pull the trigger. A.T would handle the rest, he knew.

But A.T knew it was pointless hanging around. He started putting the sheets back in the knapsack and beckoned Manoj with a nod. Just as Manoj walked towards A.T, in the background he saw a tall and statuesque turbaned man drive his Indigo out of the Academy!

Accustomed to years of posting in the mountains of Jammu & Kashmir, DIG Rana Sangha was driving to the foothills of the nearby Anjaneri fort. Jogging up and down the fort had been his morning exercise routine ever since he had come to the Academy.

Seeing A.T on his guard Manoj slowly looked behind. The Indigo passed him by.

Surreptitiously, A.T started the bike and Manoj straddled across. They drove carefully behind the Indigo without trying to attract attention.

16 kilometres later the Indigo stopped at Anjaneri Phata. The DIG got out of his car and started doubling up towards the village settlement situated at the foothills of the fort. The Hayabusa stopped next to the Indigo. A.T said to Morey, "Now!"

Morey got off the bike and ran in the direction of the DIG. When he was close enough, raising his gun sideways, he shot the DIG in the back. Injured, the officer swerved around when Manoj heard the Hayabusa engine rev. He backed up with a second shot in the chest and the third on the forehead.

Just as Manoj Morey started to run towards the Hayabusa, he saw A.T and stopped in his tracks. Before he could fathom what was happening A.T's bullet pierced through Manoj Morey's third eye chakra, crushing his skull.

"Breaking News! Deputy Inspector General Digvijay Rana Singha was shot by an unknown young man this morning at 7:50 am on the foothills of the Anjaneri fort, which is approximately 16 kilometres away from the Maharashtra Police Academy, Nashik. The man was then shot by an unknown assailant. The Police Officer had been transferred to Nashik on a peace posting as The Deputy Director of the Police Academy there, after his guerilla crusade that led to the death of Musa Mohommad Sharif and Faiyazuddin Masud the two terrorists of the Hizbul Mujahideen. City-News has the final interview of the brave DIG in which he spoke about national security and the nexus between criminals and terrorists. Take a look."

The editor pressed 'cut' on the Avid machine. Seated beside him, Ritika looked at her 'freeze- frame' Piece-To-Camera pensively, while the

editor searched through the rushes of the interview. As a reporter, she had the last words spoken by a prominent personality who had met with a sensational death. It would have been an exclusive of sorts. But something felt amiss. The DIG's death took place minutes after her interview. For a strange reason she felt she was a part of the fiasco. She kept running snippets of her conversation with A.T through her head...but she could not put pieces of the puzzle together. *'Maybe I am over thinking,'* she thought and forced herself to edit the interview. After Sengupta got to know of the murder he sent Bhasker to cover the funeral proceedings. He wanted Ritika to edit the interview and put it on air ASAP.

By the time she got back home late that night, Ritika was too tired to even smile at *Aai* when she opened the door. On her part, *Aai*, Ritika noticed, was preoccupied in her own thoughts. She went back to putting clothes in an old cotton saree. Ritika quietly entered her home and removed her sandals.

"You want to eat something?"

"No," said Ritika and walked to the fridge. She poured herself a drink of water.

"Give this bundle to the *Dhobi* on your way to work tomorrow. *Baba* and I are leaving by the early morning bus to Pune."

"Meera *Aarya's* place? How come all of a sudden?"

"Her husband's chemotherapy starts this Thursday. We need to be there to help."

"I forgot...shit that's sad."

"*Array*... shit reminds me...yesterday that boy had come home."

"Which boy?"

"Now...what's his name... I am really growing old. Can't remember the name..."

"Ashu?"

"No...*array* that...that boy..."

"Relax *Aai*. It's no big deal. Tell me when you remember," saying this Ritika turned towards her room when she over heard, "A.T"

Ritika stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“Yes A.T!” exclaimed her mother and continued, That gangster you interviewed? I don’t know why people are so scared of him...He was fumbling in front of me ...

Ritika did not bother to hear what her mother had to say after that. She wore her sandals, grabbed her hand-bag and stormed out of the house.



Ritika was not the only one to suspect A.T. Pathak sniffed around and got reports of a spanking new Toyota Lucida meandering into the city in the wee hours of the morning.

Just as he got out of Mantralaya that evening, the first thing Pathak did was to slip information to Kaloti.

“A silver Toyota Lucida was spotted going back and forth on the Nasik highway in the wee hours of the night. Make a list of registration numbers for me, will you?”

When he hung up, Kaloti looked at his younger son writing notes on the dining table which doubled up as a big door for a cabinet as well. Kaloti had always been disgruntled with his cramped-up existence. He had managed to get the older boy out of the country. The younger one was hardworking just as well. When Kaloti had started his career as a sub-inspector, he too had the ethics of a diligent police officer. But then as he saw more of life, he also noticed its gross injustice.

The biggest one being the accident of birth. Those who were born poor, died poor, observed Kaloti. And he did not want to be one of ‘those’ people. And that’s how he started using his office to upgrade his lifestyle. Under the aegis of gangsters, he earned more than what he did with the police force. Promptly he called A.T and told him what he knew.

“I have been asked to find out which gangster owns a silver Toyota Lucida? Apparently, it was spotted in Nasik,” said Kaloti softly.

A.T hung up. He planted his glass on the bar-top and after a beat, he looked at the terrace. Mistry, Munawar and Hakim were having a smoke. Just then Mistry got a call and he started talking on his phone. A.T took a sip of his drink as he saw Mistry turn his back on his men and speak in hushed tones. In the moment, there was something about the old man he did not trust. But then, maybe, thought A.T, he was just getting edgy? Who could he trust after all? Immediately Ritika came to mind and he smiled. Mistry walked towards the bar and gave the phone to A.T. "Boss," he said.

"Boss, the police have a clue that it could be us." A.T wasted no time.

"Don't worry. Dahanukar is our man. I will ask Mistry to handle him. You keep getting our jobs done and I assure you, that no harm will come your way. By the way, I must admit you've got guts A.T. I have been watching the news. What a sensational execution!" said Boss. Abruptly the call dropped. A.T handed the mobile back to Mistry. The door-bell rang. Just as Hakim answered the door, Ritika stormed right in and stood in front of A.T.

"What next A.T?"

"What are you doing here?"

"What story do I cover now gangster A.T? Should I say that the DIG was killed by the dead Usman?"

The men stared at Ritika. No one had dared to speak to them that way. Seething, A.T grit his teeth.

"C'mon say it. You have used me you bastard!"

"*Aye! Bastard kisko bolti hain?*" shouted Munawar. As he stormed towards her menacingly, he rolled up his sleeves.

Thinking that he was going to slap her, involuntarily Ritika started to move back.

"Munawar," said A.T, "stop it". But this time Munawar did not pay attention to A.T. He had never liked women and something about Ritika pissed him off. Determined to slap her, he raised his hand and just then there was a gun-shot.

They turned to the source. A.T was fuming. "Munawar behave," he snapped sternly. Then turning to a stone shocked Ritika he said, "Get out!"

“What?!”

“Get out. Now.”

A.T stormed towards Ritika and clutching her tight by her arm he flung her out the door and slammed it shut.

Slowly, very slowly Ritika walked down 10 stories of the building. She was not thinking. She was numb. Ritika slowly staggered out the apartment gates. From his terrace A.T watched Ritika as she walked away.

In his car, he was sipping a cold beer when plain clothed Pathak saw Ritika Khanolker leave A.T’s premises late in the night. After the initial set back, however, he started to smile. Seated next to him, his wife, who thought they were just out to grab a late-night beer looked at her husband. “Stop smiling like that. You are scaring me,” she said. She was right, there was something sinister about her husband in that moment.

The next morning, Ritika dropped the bundle of clothes at the *dhobi* and was on her way to work when she got a call from ACP Pathak. He summoned her to Kurla Crime Branch.

From the tone of his voice, Ritika knew that this was not going to be a regular meeting. On a hunch, she called Agastya Sengupta and kept him in the loop. “ACP Pathak wants to have a word with me sir. I will be at Kurla Crime Branch. Sir I need a favour. I think he may interrogate me.”

“*Interrogate?* Why? What have you done?”

“Nothing at all. I hope you can trust me Sir.”

“You are the best reporter I have. Go along. I will speak to Pathak’s boss DCP Ishwar Daga. And after it’s over, march straight into my cabin. We need to talk.”

Five hours later, Ritika was still sitting in Pathak’s cabin. There was no sign of him. Ritika had called, left messages.

But every attempt went unanswered.

Finally, when she typed ‘**Leaving now**’, she got a prompt reply from him ‘**No wait**’.

A couple of minutes later a sweaty constable walked in and said that Pathak had sent for her. He escorted her to a shed behind the main building. Ritika heard a strange gut-wrenching yelp. It first sounded like a dog in pain but as the screaming got louder she realized it was a man. Ritika’s stomach started to churn and she wanted to throw up.

There was a world of a difference in going to a police station as a reporter and as a suspect. Ritika now knew that ACP Pathak suspected her to be an abettor of the crimes committed by A.T. He and many others, no longer thought of her as a crime reporter... in their eyes she was a *criminal* reporter.

There is a thin line between crime reporting and criminal reporting. And that thin line is *integrity*, realized Ritika in the moment. Yes, her integrity and honesty would save her.

When Pathak came out of the shed wiping a handkerchief down his jaw, he expected to see her disturbed. This tactic of making white collared professionals 'hear' the interrogation of terror suspects had worked wonderfully in the past.

However, seated in front of him was a calm young woman. There was an aura of dignity and self- assurance about her. 'I will break her in two minutes,' thought Pathak as he checked his mobile. There was a message from his boss. DCP Ishwar Daga was meeting Bureau Chief Agastya Sengupta at the Press Club that evening. There was nothing more to the loaded message.

Pathak knew that he had to take it easy with the girl. But then white-collar interrogations had always been easy.

He walked up a creaky staircase to a dingy room. Ritika followed suit. Dimly lit, the room stank of stale urine. There was one chair in the room. Pathak went in and took a seat. Just as Ritika was about to enter he said, "Wait".

Ritika did as she was told. Pathak stared at her. But Ritika did not let his gaze bother her. She knew that he was doing it for effect. Then a lady constable walked in and beckoned Ritika to enter.

When Ritika walked in, the lady constable shut the door and bolted it. "Good afternoon, I hope I did not keep you waiting for long," said Pathak reeking of sarcasm.

"Yes sir, you did," said Ritika calmly.

"Of course. You are a star reporter now... so how does it feel to get yet another exclusive?"

White collar interrogations always start like any other cocktail conversation. It is like a game of chess where the executor pretends to

know more than the suspect. However, in her eyes, she was no suspect. She had done nothing wrong.

“If we spoke to the point, sir, we’d save time. It is precious for both of us.”

Pathak had always liked Ritika’s spunk but that was in the past. He was determined on trapping A.T by cracking the unholy nexus between the media and the underworld.

Pathak: I am sure you’ve heard of MCOCA?

Khanolker: Maharashtra Control of Organized Crime Act.

Pathak: You could get booked under that Miss. It’s a non bailable offence.

Khanolker: No, you can’t do that.

Pathak: Yes, I can. A.T called you that afternoon when you were on the Mumbai Nasik highway. On your way to Nasik. We have a Call Detail Record of all your mobile calls over last 5 months. Miss Khanolker, what exactly did you tell your mother when you were at A.T’s house at 3:00 A.M?

And that’s when, with great poise and aplomb Ritika told her story. How she was always ambitious; how Bhasker introduced her to a *khabree*; about spotting A.T in Naga’s interview; how she met him late one night; how she got unknown calls after that night; how every time she got the calls she reported to none other than Pathak; about the threatening calls from Usman; about A.T telling her about Usman’s counterfeit factory; slipping the story to Sulochana as she was scared for her life; refusing money when A.T offered her; about being asked by Sulochana if she was on A.T’s pay roll; A.T going to her place in his absence; her going to A.T’s that late to confront him and how he threw her out of his house.

Every word she spoke was steeped in honesty and integrity- and Pathak was experienced enough to know that. He also knew that Ritika’s records of meeting A.T at his Pochkhanawala Road flat matched with his surveillance reports. After A.T had left the Sessions Court in his Prado, Pathak had put junior officers to keep a watch on him. Pathak also knew that Ritika was not interested in money. She had never asked for her share that was liable to her for being a police informer who helped nab a huge contraband.

But Pathak wanted to get A.T.

Pathak: I hope you know that you have been used as a pawn in an inter-gang rivalry.

Khanolker: We are wiser in retrospect. Yes, I have been manipulated and--

Pathak: C'mon now Miss Khanolker. You've done enough for these gangsters. It's your duty to do something for the Police too.

Ritika looked at Pathak. She knew what was coming.



The next evening, Ritika was in the City News Studio looking at a teleprompter stationed in front of her. "And action!" ordered the TV producer. Ritika read her anchor script out loud.

RITIKA

Good evening and welcome to the 9-clock bulletin. I am Ritika Khanolker and the headlines this evening are as follows: According to sources DIG Digvijay Rana Singha was not shot by any member of a terrorist outfit. Underworld gangster A.T Pradhan is the prime suspect behind the assassination. While there is no solid evidence to prove him guilty of charge, the Crime Branch is working on gathering proof.

Watching the bulletin from his cabin ACP Pathak was a happy man. It was a signal sent out to unnerve A.T. Babban Mistry was pleased to hear the news. This meant that the noose was tightening on A.T. Home Minister Dahanuker made a mental note of the telecast. Bhasker, Sulochana and other crime reporters inferred that Ritika was no longer on A.T's pay roll.

In his bedroom, A.T calmly loaded 6 bullets in the chamber of his Mauser.



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At Ram Niwaas, A.T waited on the landing that lead to the building terrace. He remembered the spot. Months ago, they had hugged and held hands here. He had assuaged her panic then. And today he was going to kill her.

There was a creak ... the door of the terrace opened and a young teenage couple walked hurriedly down the stairs. The couple tried to hide their faces from A.T, embarrassed of their clandestine meeting.

He could hear their steps shuffle all the way down 3 floors. There was no movement for a while. And then he heard footsteps; the *tok-tok* of sandals as they climbed up.

Ritika came into view as she opened the door to her flat. Just then, with lightning speed A.T ran down the stairs and pushed her hard.

Ritika fell to the floor face down, into her flat. In an attempt to get her bearings, she turned around. A.T kicked the door shut. She was about to scream for help when he closed her mouth with the thrust of his palm. A.T jabbed the Mauser to her forehead. Their eyes met. One had fear, and the other, unutterable dejection.

Despite wanting to, he could not pull the trigger. Frustrated, he let go off her.

“You are going against me? Ritika? Me?”

“I was doing my job...”

“Job? Who made you, you bitch?”

“You did me no favour A.T.”

A.T moved a notch closer and pulled the trigger. The bullet passed aside her shoulder and she cowered down holding her ears.

It was the first time A.T’s aim had missed the target. He stormed out of the house banging the door shut.

Ritika flopped on the floor.

A.T swerved the Daewoo Cielo into the compound of his apartment building and then raced the car down into the underground parking lot. He slammed the brakes and the car came to an abrupt halt. A.T put his head on the steering wheel. He was drained. When his phone rang, he cut the call. He was in no mood to speak to anyone right now. But the phone kept ringing incessantly. Helpless, he took the call. It was Boss.

-Hello?

- A.T? You are under too much pressure I hear?

A.T did not reply.

-Look just do what Mistry has told you to do. Okay? You know what I am talking about right? And watch how all this police-media *tamaasha* stops.

Saying this the Boss hung up.

In 28 years of his life A.T had never been this helpless. He felt suffocated and got out of the car. Despite not wanting to he would have to do certain things. It was time to take action. Now.

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The ocean was rough that morning. Often the dinghy went below the surface of the jerky waves. But the ginger chewing fisherman was undeterred. So was A.T. Though he did not take to water like fish, A.T knew that sea-sickness could be controlled by mind and breath. Else one had to wait till the waters calmed down. So, all through the journey into the choppy international waters A.T focused on his breath. In his mind he kept saying to himself, "*I do very well in high seas, I do very well in high seas.*" Moreover, he kept his eye on the horizon. While everything else is in motion, the horizon always remains static. Keeping an eye on static objects alleviates sea sickness.

After 3 hours and 22 min A.T saw something. It was a silhouette of a vessel on the bleached horizon. Promptly he asked the local fisherman to drop the speed of their motorized wooden boat. From his knapsack, he pulled out a set of binoculars. Looking through his super high magnification Sunagors he saw a large fishing trawler afloat. There were three men looking in the direction of the boat. One of them handed a set of binoculars to the other. '*That must be it*' A.T presumed and asked the fisherman to go towards the trawler.

A.T then pulled out a bottle of drinking water from his knapsack. He was carrying three such bottles and an elongated plastic tiffin box packed with *methi* and *rawa laddoos* for his journey. And a small gun: COP 357 Derringer.

After finishing half the bottle of water, he kept it back in the knapsack along with the other two bottles. He gobbled two *methi laddoos* in quick

succession. He then removed the plastic cover and from the bottom half of the tiffin, he picked a white *rawa laddoo* and munched on. Stuffed, he washed his food down with another gulp of water. Then A.T pulled out a toothpaste from his knapsack. Just as he twirled the lid open he thought of Ritika. Dialing her number, he absent-mindedly put the toothpaste in the tiffin, covered it with the top plastic shelf and shut it with a lid.

Then, he called Ritika yet again. Despite knowing that she would not take his call, he persisted, hoping to hear her voice. Ritika's phone went unanswered. He called her back, but to no avail. He called her yet again. And this time he left her a voice message.

“90 – AK-56 Assault rifles, 245 AK-56 magazines and 1000 kgs RDX in a fishing trawler, 3 hours and 80 nautical miles East off Vakratunda. Nobody knows Vakratunda. It is not on any map. It is a small fishing village along a small cove. You can only reach it from a bigger cove called Bhogva. You will have to ask for Bhogva when you reach Vengurla. It is on the Mumbai-Goa highway almost-

His time was up and he had to hang up as he had consumed the allotted space on the voicemail. He hoped that Ritika would call him back.

Ritika called. Not A.T but her Boss Agastya Sengupta. This time he did not ask her to wait. He gave her his leads into the Customs Department and he made calls to his contacts in the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence. Ritika also contacted Pathak hoping that he'd help her with the police jurisdiction that had to be alerted for the same.

“Whose contraband is it this time?”

“I don't know Sir. All I know is that this time the voice message is definitely A.T's.”

“I will get you officers you can speak with in the Konkan Coast,” said Pathak.

According to his knowledge terror groups needed support from the local mafia to execute their plans. Currently the Mumbai Police was busy cleaning the scum of mafia from Mumbai. In fact, barring a handful lieutenants of the Khalif Gang, there was no one who had the clout. Assuming the contraband was Khalif's then why would A.T spill the beans?

Pathak called Kaloti. "I want Babban Mistry in my cabin *by yesterday*" he commanded.

The police officer buckled down to work.

The reporter got cracking on her job.

And the gangster got cracking on his.

As he moved towards the trawler, A.T made a call to Boss.

"I am approaching the trawler. Please ask them to co-operate."

"Where is Mistry?"

"Right now, at the jetty, making deals with boat owners and paying the boatmen. He just paid my boatman one lakh to ferry me in the high seas. Work needs to be done before customs and police get to know so please co-operate Boss."

Taken aback by A.T's authoritative tone, Khalif paused for a beat and replied, "Ask Babban to call me ASAP," saying this he hung up. *After my job is done I will get back at A. T for his insolence*, thought Khalif.

A.T had a sip of water. He opened his tiffin box yet again and had one more *laddoo*. Then looking through his binoculars, A.T flagged out a green piece of cloth. The three men on the trawler looked through their binoculars. A.T sipped some more water and popped yet another *laddoo* from the box.

When he was at the base of the trawler the man with binoculars looked down. He nodded at his acolyte who then threw the rope. Straddling his knapsack on his shoulders A.T climbed up the rope ladder with the deftness of a soldier.

When he jumped on the deck of the trawler there were five men staring at A.T, expressionless.

"You are Abdul Rahman, right?" A.T said to the man who had the binoculars and continued, "I need to see the consignment."

"Check him," said Abdul Rahman to his crony who had thrown the rope down.

"We are supposed to work together. Why are you checking me?" protested A.T.

"Orders from Boss. Looks like he does not trust you," smirked Abdul Rahman.

The man frisked A.T and found a small gun. The crony looked at it and was partially amused.

“COP 357 Derringer,” said Abdul Rahman and turned around to his cronies “women carry this a lot in *Amrica*.”

The others sniggered.

“We were told so much about your prowess with the gun! And this is what you carry?” said Abdul Rahman contemptuously as he held the butt of the gun.

“I knew you would not cause me much harm,” said A.T.

The crony then opened the knapsack. There were three bottles of water and a grey tiffin box. The crony opened the tiffin box. A.T helped himself to a *laddoo* and passed it around.

Taken aback by his nonchalance, Abdul Rahman nodded “I can’t. I have diabetes.”

The cronies refused too. A.T coolly shut the tiffin box, zipped his knapsack and nodded, “shall we?”

Unarmed and heavily escorted he went down to see the buffet of mass destruction. There were hand grenades, pistols, machine guns, bullets and magazines. And sacks of white crystal-like substance.

“What is this?” asked A.T

“RDX” said Abdul Rahman “in its pure form. We add diesel and that’s when it becomes *kaala saboon*. But ever since the people have started getting suspicious we don’t bother mixing and bring it like it is.”

Removing the knapsack from his shoulders, A.T placed it on the floor. That he was shocked was evident, for he did not say a word. Abdul Rahman was pleased.

“So? What do you think?” asked Abdul Rahman.

A.T paused for a breath and tried to find his voice.

And then he spoke haltingly “For this... we will need 5 dinghy boats to carry to the mainland....Mistry is with the boat owners. I will get some men from the local village.... The whole operation should take around 5-7 hours.”

A.T turned around and had a sip of water. And then drank the whole bottle. He opened the lid of the 2nd bottle and just as he was about to

put it to his mouth, he looked at Abdul Rahman and his men, “I think I should leave now”.

A.T kept the bottle aside. “I will be back with Mistry Seth,” he said and walked up to the deck.

He was fumbling at the sight. And he had forgotten his bag as well.

When A.T started the speedboat, Abdul Rahman dialed Khalif. He told him how their ‘project’ was finally going to be green-lit. He and his men were fed-up of being in the waters this long, he complained to Boss Khalif and added -

“*Maaf karna bhaijaan* but we were not impressed with your A.T at all,” said Abdul Rahman and went on to tell him about the gun he had carried and his reaction on seeing the weapons of mass destruction...

10 minutes later once A.T had crossed the 2 kilometers mark from the trawler, he heard a massive explosion. A.T smiled. Mission accomplished. The trawler had exploded in the sea.

Here is what A.T had done:

Along with the box of *methi laddoos*, A.T had made *laddoos* of gunpowder. And in the lower shelf of the tiffin two white *laddoos* were made of *rawa*. The rest were balls comprising equal volume of salt and sugar.

In the tube of ‘toothpaste’ was acid, H₂SO₄. While he was munching on the *laddoos* in the ship, he surreptitiously twirled the cap of the tube thereby allowing the acid to drip out bit by bit. It was as slow as a saline drip given to an elderly patient.

When the terrorists showed him the buffet of mass destruction – hand grenades, pistols, 1000 kilos of white crystals of RDX and detonators, he pretended to be shocked. So shocked that he absent-mindedly left his bag next to the detonators. He opened his bottle of water but he did not drink it. Because it was not water. It was acetone...

Soon he left, pretending to be perplexed at the sight of weapons.

It took more than half an hour for the acid in the toothpaste to mix with the salt and sugar *laddoos*. That caused a small explosion in the tiffin box. With that explosion the gunpowder laddoos exploded as well, creating a small fire. The open bottle of acetone, had evaporated enough to inflame the fire and ignite the bundle of detonators. Lying next to the explosives.

And once the detonators were ignited it did not take long for the ship to explode.

And this action was enough to blast the ship off, that had carried RDX and Weapons of mass destruction, intended to kill innocent masses working hard in the financial capital of India.

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An hour later, Pathak and his posse of cops tried to break into A.T's apartment. A rancid stench disgorged from the closed flat. As the door thrust open everyone reached out for their handkerchiefs.

In a pool of blood, Munawar's corpse lay swollen looking, face up. His body was discoloured in a purple-blue pigment. Since there was no visible bullet wound, ACP Pathak quickly presumed he was shot in the back of his head.

Hakim's corpse was kneeled over head first. Which meant he had been shot on the forehead. From the side, Pathak noted, his face and neck were bruised red.

The officer then saw a head bobbing in a large pan. Chairs around the table were overthrown, indicating that a struggle had ensued. As they removed the *pancha* wrung around the neck – the purple face filled with blisters had its eyes popping out. Though they knew what he looked like, still, it was difficult to identify the face. With 63-year-old Babban Mistry, now dead, it was the end of an era for Mumbai Underworld.

"3 out of 4 dead. That's good for us" announced Pathak to his team now. He marched out the plush apartment wondering where A.T could be.



The next morning Ritika's speed boat stopped in the middle of the sea as soon they spotted marine fire at a distant.

Ritika readied herself for her Piece-To- Camera. Holding the mike close to her she asked, "Ready Ashu?"

Just then another relentless blast from the direction of the fire startled Ritika and her mike fell to the floor.

She too lost her balance but Ashu put his hand out and Ritika managed to steady herself.

His camera, still rolling, captured shaky images of the devastation in the middle of the ocean.

And just like the ship-blast created a colossal fire in the sea, Ritika's exclusive reportage about a bomb-blast in the middle of the Indian Ocean got maximum eyeballs.

Larger networks sent their senior reporters to the hitherto unknown Vakratund cove.

Many veteran reporters called Sengupta to congratulate him on the excellent news coverage.

NNN's Shimoni Mohanty, Ritika's idol, flew down from Delhi and got in touch with Ritika for further leads on the story.

Speculation was the order of the day. *"Where did the boat come from? How safe are our waters? How come no one had known? Who did the explosives belong to? What was the repercussion on marine life?"*

Home Minister Jayant Dahanuker was switching news channels in Mantralaya when a landline rang. Dahanuker looked at the ringing phone and paused. That phone was a secret number which was given to few men. The calls made to and from this number were highly sensitive in nature.

No one, not even his wife knew of this phone number. He reached out for the phone and even before he could say hello he heard, "I want A.T. Alive." It was Khalif.

"But why did you bother? For something like this you could have asked Babban."

"Mistry is dead. He has killed all my key men."

Dahanuker hung up. He and Mistry went back a long way.



Kaloti was trying to eaves drop on the conversation between Pathak and his senior Ishwar Daga, when the fax from the Home Minister's office came to the Control Room.

He read the red-alert and promptly messaged A.T. That was the least he could do for a man who had made sure both his sons studied in the United States of America.

However, the *double-dholki* in Kaloti raised its ugly head. He called his 'friends', Bhasker, Sulochana, and Naga and informed that A.T had killed members of his own gang.

Word spread and the news media went into a tizzy.

News channels stationed their crew round-the-clock on Lady Pochkhanawala Road. Cameramen took shots of A.T's 10th floor flat. Reporters said that his flat was empty, that he was on the run. Some interviewed domestic staff like the milkman and the newspaper boy who entered the premises. They tried to speak to the society members who had no clue that a gangster lived in their midst. But that happens in Mumbai all the time. We are so enmeshed in our lives that we hardly know those who reside in the same apartment complex as we do.

At home, Ritika watched a raucous Bhasker on-screen. At first, he interviewed the postman who frequented the apartment building. The postman claimed he had never delivered anything on the 10th floor. Next, Bhasker looked into the camera -

BHASKER

If found guilty of the charges what will be his fate? And as we speak where is A.T? Who is he hiding with? If you get to know just phone us. Our hotline numbers are...

Ritika smiled sadly as her eyes welled up with tears. Just a month ago he was a king. Today he was absconding. But how far could he go? It was only a matter of time until they arrested him... or worst...killed him in a police encounter.

Ritika shuddered at the thought. And just as she started to pray for a miracle, she heard her door open. Hoping it was her parents, Ritika turned around. It was A.T.

Standing still, Ritika looked on. She was furious, for A.T had barged into her house with a fake key. But she was glad to see him just as well. She was angry, fearful, and felt betrayed. But there was helplessness, care

and concern too. She wanted to hide him, run away with him and at the same time felt like an idiot for wishing she had a camera to shoot him and put the story on-air.

He started to walk towards her.

“That I manipulated you, that I used you, is as true as that I loved you. And I still love you. I will always love you. And I could not say this over the phone. You had to know that. I love you Ritika.”

Ritika sat down on her sofa and stared at the floor. A.T went on his knees and put his head in her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair.

“Anybody...just anybody else...A.T...” Cupping his face she looked into his eyes and screamed, “Couldn’t you just be ANYBODY else but a *fucking gangster!*?”

“Next time, I promise -

He could not finish his sentence as Ritika’s guard broke down and she burst into tears. She hugged him tight.

He hugged her back. Ritika cried in his arms. He kissed her. He ran his fingers down her cheeks. She held him and put her head on his chest. She cried till her tears dried up.

After some time, A.T looked at Ritika and softly he kissed her lips.

And then, he left...leaving the fake key by her side.



Meeting Ritika infused fresh zeal in A.T. He was no longer dejected. He resolved he'd get out of this mess. Should he cross the border to Myanmar and from there to Bangkok? What would he do in Bangkok? How about Hong Kong then? Work for the Triads there? Khalif had his tentacles into the heart of South-East Asia, actually in most parts of the globe. But that did not mean that A.T could not plot an escape. He had single handedly plotted and executed homicides in the past. He had masterminded the death of Usman without direct involvement. Surely, he could plot an escape for himself. *What if I get in touch with one of the Indian Intelligence Agencies, like RAW or IB or National Investigation Agency?*

The idea struck a chord!

A.T drove out of the narrow Mangal Wadi onto Girgaum Road thinking of who to get in touch with, when a police jeep came roaring in from the opposite side and screeched to a halt. A.T swerved to the left on Thakur Dwar and sped away.

The jeep zoomed straight down and taking a U-turn it started to follow A.T.

But A.T had already taken a right at Khattar Galli. There he abandoned his Prado opposite Jain Bank and sprinted down CP Tank to enter Parsi Wada Street No.1. He was running towards Sardar Vallabhai Patel Road from where he planned to get into Falkland Road, a red- light hub.

Thriving with sex, roadside food and alcohol, a red- light area was perfect to get lost in the middle of the night. In the heart of the city

now, there were 4 such pockets for A.T to choose from; Mumbai Sangeet Kala Mandal opposite Congress House, Kamathipura, Foras Road and Falkland Road.

Kamathipura had three police stations in its vicinity. Ironically the red-light pocket had more security than any middle class residential zone in the city.

As wireless messages flew back and forth, squads from all stations were on the streets. For A.T was a prized catch. One of the squads spotted A.T's Prado. Another went to Kamathipura while the third looked for A.T in Mumbai Sangeet Kala Mandal. Two constables were stationed by the abandoned Prado.

As A.T walked down Falkland Road, he checked his watch. It was 9:30 in the night. The Mumbai Howrah Mail would depart from CST in five minutes. If he could make it to Dadar in twenty minutes he would just about be able to make it. Else he'd hide in the red-light area and catch the Geetanjali Express that left CST at 6:00 AM.

If he could only get on that train, he'd be in Kolkata after a day. From there he'd find a way to get into Myanmar. It would be easier to collaborate with Indian Intelligence from outside the country. In the mean time he'd hide in a brothel, he thought. A.T looked around. He saw women trying to solicit customers. There were children playing alongside. A.T saw the infamous *hijda gully* – for those men who had a proclivity for eunuchs. Then there were Chinese dental clinics which allegedly provided opium for sex workers, pimps and customers.

As he started to approach Alfred Cinema and Delhi Darbar, the landmark theater and restaurant on one end of Falkland Road, he saw a pack enter from Grant Road Junction. He knew they were cops. He turned around and started to walk back. He had just taken a step or two when he saw plain clothed Pathak and Kaloti walk from the other side of the street.

Swiftly A.T entered a dental clinic. The Chinese dentist looked on sans expression. Most of his customers were the regular lot. He did not know this stranger. Playing it cool A.T said, "I want some..."

"What?!" snapped the Chinese dentist.

His back to the main street, A.T bought time, "let me just text my friend. How much you got?" Saying this A.T inadvertently typed a text message to Ritika. **Falkland. Coming?**

And just then the Chinese Dentist was on his guard, his mouth agape. A.T did not bother turning around. He knew he was cornered.

“Hands Up,” said Pathak. A.T did as he was told. He was still facing the wall when A.T heard Kaloti’s voice ordering the Chinese Dentist to vacate his clinic.

“I am not here to kill you okay. There is going to be no encounter. You should co-operate with us. I know you have been wronged. And I also know that the blast in the sea saved our city,” said Pathak.

But A.T knew that there was no escape now. He had killed a senior cop. And Pathak was no well-wisher. He’d have to surrender. But then again, A.T was an intelligent man. Quickly he weighed the pros and cons. Even if he did offer all he knew about Khalif to the Police and Indian Intelligence – he’d still be a trapped man. They would use him against Khalif, use him like a pawn. But A.T had always been a free man. He loved his independence and freedom. He also knew that in any situation, however desperate it may be, man was always free to choose.

“Alright,” said A.T and turned around. “Sir, can I make just one phone call?”

Pathak nodded, his gun still aimed at A.T’s chest.

With a speed of light, A.T removed a COP Derringer from his pocket. Choosing the freedom of death over the entrapment of life, A.T swiftly pulled the trigger for the last time. Aiming his temple, he chose, what *he* thought was the best way to die. *A bullet shot accurately aimed at a strategic part of the body, like the head.*

Because when death comes knocking, it better be quick, over and done with.



Not knowing what to expect, Ritika came to Falkland Road with a news mike, camera and her trusted colleague Ashu.

From a distance she saw a clique of cops. When ACP Pathak came into view, she stopped in her tracks for a beat and then walked towards him.

On his part, he took a step towards her. “There was no encounter. A.T shot himself when we asked him to surrender.”

The gravity of death of a dear one always takes a while to sink in. Ritika was her professional best. She asked the police officer for further details. After he was done, Pathak made way for Ritika.

She did not see A.T at first. One of Pathak's men was circumventing the corpse by chalk. After he had finished, she got a glimpse of him. She wanted to scream out loud, she wanted to hold him, she wanted to caress his face. But she could do none of that. She had to maintain a stoic expression that befitted a reporter. After all she was on-field, doing her job.

Two constables came close to A.T's body. Each held one of his limp legs and dragged him to the van. They dumped his body in the van as if it was garbage.

Taking the mike attached to Ashu's camera, Ritika walked to the chalk-mark of A.T's body. Pathak watched her as she took a deep breath and asked, "Rolling Ashu?"

When Ashu made a thumbs up, Ritika started her piece to camera -

"Breaking News! Gangster A.T shot himself less than an hour ago. After 2 days of an incessant man-hunt for A.T, ACP Pathak of the Mumbai Crime Branch cornered him. Just as he was about to arrest him, A.T shot himself in his right temple with a COP 357 Derringer.

*We are reminding you that City News has broken the news of the elusive gangster, A.T's suicide. A.T Pradhan – Short for **Altaf Tassaduq Sheikh Pradhan** was the son of a doctor. His father T.S Pradhan, Tassaduq Sheikh Pradhan was a general practitioner in Byculla. His maternal uncle, Sameer Khan is a retired Colonel of the Indian Army.*

Sources tell us that it was A.T who created a sea fire as he allegedly blasted a ship carrying weapons of mass destruction into India. Here is a death of great irony. When A.T did all the wrongs, everything worked in his favour. One act where he chose conscience over crime and terror made him lose everything, including his life. This is a story of a criminal who finally responded to his conscience. The conscience of a criminal.

From the red-light area of Falkland Road in Girgaum, this is Ritika Khanolkar for City News Mumbai."

Ritika paused till she heard Ashu say "Cut". Ashu then started to take shots of the place. Ritika looked at ACP Pathak. "My senior Bhaskar Menon will be in touch with you Sir," she said.

Usually she'd wait till Ashu finished and then head back to the office to edit the story and put it on-air for the breakfast bulletin. But not tonight. Someone else would have to do that for her.

After all, Ritika Khanolker was just a 22-year-old young woman who needed to cry for a man she had loved and lost.



| Epilogue

19 years later

18th Jan 2018

10:00 AM

National News Network

New Delhi

“...And lastly, Swati Sarkar, always remember that the voice-over script of a news story should be crisp, smart and packed with information” said National News Network’s Chief International Correspondent, Ritika Khanolker to a young intern on the first day of her first job.

“Thanks, Ritika.” Saying this Swati got up to leave. As an after- thought she added, “Ritika Khanolker, I hope to be like you one day.”

“Please don’t,” said Ritika with a smile. A puzzled Swati smiled back with a frown. Ritika explained herself further, “If you become Ritika, then who becomes Swati? Be yourself Swati Sarkar, and know that there is no one like you. Go on, be the best of who you are meant to be.”

Smiling, Swati Sarkar left the cabin and Ritika buckled to liaison with the Intelligence Bureau and Research and Analysis Wing.

These days RITIKA KHANAIKER tracks ISIS radicalization in South East Asia. For her stories, she has won the prestigious Ramnath Goenka Award given for outstanding work in Journalism.

The face of National News Network, Ritika anchors prime-time daily telecasts of the channel and is loved by viewers.

In her personal life, she is a wife and a mother of 6-year-old twins now. Ritika's *Aai* and *Baba* are hands-on grandparents and take such good care of the girls that Ritika is free to excel in her career.

Ritika met Kunal Arya at the World Economic Forum she covered 7 years ago in 2011. She had filled in for the business correspondent who came down with dengue hours before the Inauguration Ceremony. Ritika and Kunal were destined to meet because never before or after the WEF-2011 has Ritika, covered business news.

Kunal is a great guy! A successful well-travelled businessman who dotes on his wife and daughters.

With a sky rocketing career, family and running a home, Ritika has no time to spare.

But there are moments...times when she sits back and her thoughts drift close to two decades ago. To that man...

The shrewd manipulator who catapulted her career from an unknown intern to a star reporter.

The criminal, whose one act guided by his conscience, stripped him off his power, off his life.

That gangster...who had touched her, in a way, no man ever could

Written by Vrushali Telang

PRIME TIME CRIME

An Intern Reporter
A Sophisticated Gangster
&
A Dirty Love Story

Within a month of joining City-News, **Ritika** an intern manages to get an exclusive TV interview with sophisticated gangster **A.T** the recent crime sensation. During the interview **Ritika** and **A.T** find themselves getting attracted to one another. Soon they share a torrid chemistry and find it difficult to stay away from each other. Does **A.T** love **Ritika**, or is he using her as a pawn for a dangerous plot? Did he manipulate circumstances so that only she could get through to him? Does **Ritika** love **A.T** or is she playing along in order to get leads for investigative crime stories? Is she out to catapult her career from an unknown intern with a local network to being a 'star' reporter with a national news channel? Set against the backdrop of Mumbai Underworld in 1999, **PRIME TIME CRIME** is a story about a relationship that is ruthless, passionate and manipulative. A story that stinks of lies, deceit and death. Did they ever, even if it was for a moment, truly love each other? Are relationship as honest as we'd like them to be? In the unholy nexus of mafia and news media who can you trust? With vibrant characters, razor sharp plot that moves at breakneck speed, **PRIME TIME CRIME** is an overpowering love story that will haunt you for long...

"A dark story that is beautifully intertwined with manipulation, ambition and love. That's what makes this book compelling, sensational and unstoppable. I couldn't put it down till I had finished it. I would highly recommend this book to anyone. A must read!" -Kajol, Actor.

Fiction

ISBN : 978-93-86455-52-9



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