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JAMES PATTERSON



PRIVATE INDIA: CITY ON FIRE

ASHWIN SANGHI

Private India: City on Fire

James Patterson

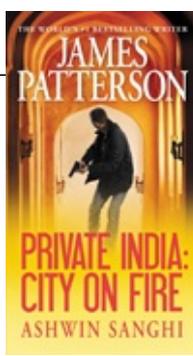
AND

Ashwin Sanghi



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THE PRIVATE NOVELS

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Private Down Under (with Michael White)

Private L.A. (with Mark Sullivan)

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Private (with Maxine Paetro)

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Prologue

2006

THEY EXPLODED DURING rush hour.

Pressure-cooker bombs hidden in the first-class carriages of commuter services running from Mumbai's financial district to its suburbs. Survivors would speak of bodies flung from trains, carriage floors awash with blood, screams and screams and screams...

The first bomb had gone off at exactly 6:24 p.m. All seven exploded in the space of eleven minutes. Over two hundred dead, over seven hundred injured.

And even Mumbai, no stranger to terrorist action, was shocked by the ferocity of the attacks. A city of thirteen million people, home to Bollywood, temporarily paralyzed, its airports on lockdown, its transport networks frozen.

And amid the hunt to find those responsible, fresh battle lines were drawn.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

FOURTEEN MINUTES PER room was all she had.

Whether it was tidy or left smeared with chocolate sauce, whipped cream, and telltale buttmarks on the recliner, fourteen minutes was what she had to clean each room. Start in the bathroom, change the towels, change the bed, clean the cups, dust and vacuum, and then on to the next room.

And though she would never have admitted it to her colleagues at the Marine Bay Plaza, Sunita Kadam took a pride in meeting (and especially beating) that fourteen-minute time limit. In fact, on her housekeeping cart was a stopwatch she carried for that very purpose. She picked it up as she arrived at room number 1121 and knocked smartly—maid's knock, loud but gentle—then began the stopwatch.

Twenty seconds. No answer. With a deliberate jangle of master keys she let herself in.

“Hello? Housekeeping.”

Again no answer. Good. And what's more, the room was tidy. Though an evening dress hung from a handle of the closet, the bed looked as if it hadn't been slept in. Nets at the window billowed beneath a blast of air conditioning, giving the room a clean, aired feel. *Six minutes to service this room* thought Sunita. *Maybe seven.*

Unless, of course, there was a nasty surprise in the bathroom.

From her cart she collected towels and toiletries and went there now, clicking on the light at the same time as she reached for the door handle and pushed.

She came up short. The door would only budge an inch or so. Something on the other side—probably a wet towel that had slipped off a rail—was preventing it from opening.

Inside, the fluorescents struggled, flickering as she pushed the door. With an exasperated sigh she gave it one last shove and there was a splintering sound. Something heavy fell to the floor on the other side and, finally, the lights came on—and Sunita Kadam saw what was inside.

On the tiles lay a woman's corpse. She wore a white nightshirt and her face was colorless. In contrast, the yellow cotton scarf around her neck was a bright yellow. The marks it had made were livid red.

Sunita stared at the body. A numbness crept over her. A sense of wanting to run but being rooted to the spot. Later she'd look back and stifle a guilty laugh about this, but her next thought was: *How the hell am I going to clean this up in fourteen minutes?*

Chapter 2

“YOU KILLED THEM, you drunk bastard.”

With a gasp, Santosh Wagh pulled himself from the grip of his nightmare, fingers scrabbling for his spectacles on the nightstand. He pushed them on, squinted at the numbers on his bedside clock and groaned.

4:14 a.m. Drinker’s dawn.

He pulled himself from bed, avoiding his own reflection in the mirror as he lolloped out of the bedroom. Who wanted to see a hungover man at 4:14 in the morning, a craggy, 51-year-old vision of guilt and shame? Not him. Right now what he wanted was a little something to guide him gently in the morning. Something to chase away the headache lurking behind his eyes. Something to banish the residual nightmare image seared into his brain.

His apartment was empty, stale-smelling. On a coffee table in the front room was a half-empty bottle of Johnnie Walker, a glass, and his Glock in its holster. Santosh dropped with a sigh to the couch, leaned forward, fingertipped his Glock out of reach, then drew the bottle and glass toward him.

He stared at the drink in his hand, remembering, casting his mind back to 2006 and the seven Mumbai train bombs. At the time he’d been an agent with RAW, India’s intelligence agency, and the investigations into the bombings had brought him into contact with Jack Morgan.

Two years later, the car accident that plagued his dreams.

It was Jack who had asked him to head up Private India; Jack who had picked him up when he needed it most. And if he drank this drink then it would lead to another drink, and another, and with each subsequent drink he’d fall a little harder and fail Jack a little more.

He placed the glass back on the coffee table, pulled his knees up toward him. Decided to wait the morning out. He dozed, then woke, then dozed again, and each time he woke the drink was still there waiting for him. He ignored its call. He chose Jack over Johnnie.

Even so, it was a relief when the phone rang and duty called.

Chapter 3

SANTOSH LEANED ON his cane and scrutinized the dead woman who lay on the bathroom floor room number 1121.

“Name?” he said, without taking his eyes off the corpse.

Nisha Gandhe, mid forties, head-turningly attractive, even dressed down in cotton shirt, T-shirt and jeans, marveled that her boss could be an investigative genius and still not know that breath mints were useless at disguising the smell of whisky.

“Dr. Kanya Jaiyen,” she replied, reading from notes made on her phone. “Mean anything to you?”

“No,” he said. He angled his head to study the face of the deceased. She was South-East Asian middle-aged. Her sharp, attractive features looked incongruous pressed to the hard tiles of the bathroom.

“She’s Thai—from Bangkok apparently,” continued Nisha. “Her body was found by the maid. It had been hanging on a hook on the back of the door but when the door moved the hook gave way and...”

Santosh glanced at the damaged door then back at the body. He scratched salt-and-pepper stubble on his cheek.

“No signs of sexual assault,” he said, part question, part statement.

“Apparently not, but Mubeen is on his way. We should have a clearer idea once he’s through,” replied Nisha.

Mubeen was Private India’s full-time medical examiner. Time of death, cause of death, manner of death—death was his specialty. He’d arrive with Hari, Private’s technology geek, who’d be dusting for fingerprints, scanning the cell phone that Santosh had spotted by the bed. Tech-wizard stuff.

Santosh shifted his weight on his cane. The car accident had left him with a limp.

“You do realize it’s psychosomatic, don’t you?” a doctor had told him.

“I’m keeping the cane,” he’d replied.

“Have it your own way.”

He did. One of the few advantages of being Santosh Wagh was that he had things his own way. Plus it was useful to have a cane sometimes. On a morning like this, for example, when he felt as though the cane was the only thing keeping him upright.

He palmed sweat from his forehead. “Okay, let’s not touch anything until we get the go-ahead from the police. There’s nothing to prevent us from observing though. And I’m especially interested in...”

this...”

~~With the tip of his cane he indicated the victim’s hands, both wrapped with string. A flower was bound to one, an ordinary fork to the other.~~

“And this,” he said, motioning his cane at her foot. “What do you make of that?”

Tied to one of the dead doctor’s toes was a small toy Viking helmet.

Nisha bent down to take a closer look. “Could the killer be a nut job with a Viking fetish?” she asked.

“Maybe. But if he was a genuine Viking enthusiast he’d know that real Viking helmets didn’t have horns,” said Santosh. “The bull horns are an artistic contrivance.”

“Okay. So...?” said Nisha. You could almost see the cogs of his encyclopedic mind turn, she thought.

“So—either our killer doesn’t know about the horns. Or he doesn’t care. Or the Viking bit isn’t significant but the horn bit is.”

“Right...” she said, uncertainly. “And what about the flower on her hand? A lotus. And the fork? Maybe she snatched it to defend herself?”

“No,” said Santosh, lost in thought. “They were tied to her hands to look as if she’s holding them.”

Crouched down close to the body, Nisha noticed a black hair on the otherwise spotless tile floor. “There’s a hair here I’d like to bag, when we can,” she said. Santosh nodded.

“When do you think she was killed?” asked Nisha.

He glanced at her. “Look at the body. Consider the bed. The nightdress. When do *you* think she was killed?”

“Last night?”

“Exactly. Mubeen can tell us for sure, but yes—this happened last night. Did you check for signs of forced entry?”

“The windows are hermetically sealed. There’s no sign the bedroom door was forced nor any indication of lock tampering,” replied Nisha, glancing at her notes.

Santosh nodded. He looked from the body to Nisha with eyes that had seen too much pain. “That isn’t the last, Nisha,” he said. “Of that you can be certain.”

Chapter 4

“WE HAD RATHER hoped to avoid involving the police,” said the general manager, Mr. Singh—nervous man who wanted nothing more than for the whole affair to go away. “After all, the hotel employs Private India for that very reason. Are you not the world’s biggest detective agency...?”

Santosh found his eyes drawn to a bottle of whisky tucked away in a corner of the office but Singh was pouring coffee instead. Probably just as well.

“We are indeed. But unfortunately we do not manage your internal CCTV system. Furthermore this is a murder investigation, Mr. Singh,” he said regretfully. “There is no avoiding the police, I’m afraid. However, as your advisor may I suggest the call is better coming from you than from me.” He passed a card across the desk. “Ring this number, tell them there has been a suspected murder and that you have appointed the hotel’s detective agency—that’s us—to represent you in this matter.”

Singh picked up the card. “*ACP Rupesh Desai*,” he read. “This is the policeman I should call?”

Santosh nodded. “Rupesh is the Assistant Commissioner at the Mumbai Crime Branch. I can promise you his cooperation and discretion. We’re...”

He stopped himself saying “old friends”; even just “friends.” Not since the accident that broke everything.

“... we go back a long way. Now, tell me everything you can about Dr. Kanya Jaiyen.”

“All we have is the information she gave us when she checked in,” explained Singh. He passed a paper folder to Santosh, who scanned it quickly. A copy of her passport, a printout of online booking data.

“Excellent. You have a record of when the door was used?”

“Yes. It’s on its way.”

“And CCTV footage?”

“Also coming,” said Singh.

“Good,” said Santosh.

“So what now?” said Singh. “Can we assume the hotel will be kept out of any... unpleasantness?”

Santosh opened his mouth, then remembered that the Marine Bay Plaza Hotel was a client of Private India, and as the head of Private India he had to kiss ass every now and then.

“You can rest easy, Mr. Singh,” he said with what he hoped would be an ingratiating smile. “Leave it to us.”

Chapter 5

“WHAT’S PRIVATE INDIA’S interest in this case?” asked Rupesh bluntly, his hands pushed into his pockets.

He and Santosh stood in the corridor outside room 1121, now an official crime scene. For the moment Santosh had conveniently forgotten to mention the hair Nisha had recovered from the bathroom. And hopefully, if all went to plan, things would stay that way.

“The hotel chain employs Private globally,” replied Santosh. “If it isn’t a bother, Rupesh, we’d like to manage the investigation.”

Rupesh looked him up and down with disdain, as though Santosh were wearing an expensive tailored suit rather than the same shabby beige two-piece he’d worn for years. “Private India,” he sneered. “You certainly landed on your feet there, didn’t you, Jack Morgan’s little favorite? Just think without those train bombings you two might never have met. They were the best thing that ever happened to you, weren’t they?”

Santosh tried to remember that he wanted Private India to handle this case. And for that, he needed Rupesh onside. So instead of sweeping the cop’s feet from beneath him and ramming the point of his cane down his throat, he merely gave a thin smile. “To business, Rupesh, please.”

Rupesh avoided his eye as he pondered the matter for a moment. “Wait here,” he said. “I need to make a call. See what the Commissioner says.”

He moved out of earshot, his back turned and his phone to his ear as he made the call. Moments later he returned with a smile that went nowhere near his eyes. “The Commissioner is fine with it.”

“And you?”

Rupesh shrugged. “The Police Forensic Science Lab at Kalina has a six-month case backlog and half my men are on VIP duty. I’m happy to offload this case onto you.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a pouch of chewing tobacco, placing a pinch of it in the corner of his mouth. Mumbai had long since banned the sale of all processed tobacco products. Not that the ban applied to Rupesh, apparently.

Just how deep are you getting, old friend? wondered Santosh.

“So that’s settled,” added Rupesh. “Private India can spearhead the investigation provided all information is shared with us in a timely manner. Oh, and as long as any credit for successfully solving the case comes to us.” His grin was shark-like. “Mubeen will be doing the autopsy, I take it?”

“With your consent.”

“Granted. Provided the corpse is first taken to the police morgue and that the state’s medical examiner is present during the final examination. Fine?”

Santosh nodded and the two men parted. Rupesh went back to the crime scene. Santosh headed to Private HQ. *What happened to us?* wondered Santosh as he waited for the elevator. *What happened, when we used to be so close?*

Had life come between them? Or was it death?

Chapter 6

THE COCKTAIL PARTY on the rooftop of the Oberoi Hotel was what's known as a "page-three event," where guests came to strut and pose like peacocks, hoping that the shutterbugs' lenses would alight upon them.

Events like this made Bhavna Choksi feel inadequate. Even the white-gloved waiters made her feel inadequate. Not for the first time she wondered how her dreams of great journalism had been reduced to this, eking out pathetic tidbits for the *Afternoon Mirror* gossip column.

She hated the fact that she was familiar with these people. Priyanka Talati, the "singing sensation." So what? Lara Omprakash, "Bollywood's hottest director." Sure, until next week, when there would be a new one. She hated the fact that she'd be reporting on what the politician Ragini Sharma was wearing, rather than her policies.

Keeping her eye on the door for new arrivals, Bhavna saw Devika Gulati—a yoga guru to the hollywood set—waft in through the doors at the rooftop, the cutouts of her gown emphasizing her body. Devika accepted a drink from a waiter, then stood, surveying the room.

Bhavna took her chance and moved over before any of the rooftop's single men made their move. "Hello," she said, extending her hand to shake. "It's Bhavna Choksi, from the *Afternoon Mirror*. May I say that's a beautiful gown."

Devika's gaze traveled over Bhavna's shoulder, still scanning the rooftop.

"Miss Gulati?" prompted Bhavna. "We spoke on the phone. I was wondering if you'd had second thoughts about an interview."

At last Devika focused on her. "I'm sorry. Yes, of course. I'm sure we can arrange that. Please, call the studio, speak to Fiona, and she'll fit you into the diary."

"Thank you." As Bhavna moved away, she was able to see what it was that had caught Devika's eye. Or, in this case, *who* it was: India's Attorney General, Nalin D'Souza.

Interesting, she thought as she heard the faint buzzing of her phone inside her tote. Pulling it out, she answered the call.

"Ah, it's you," she said. The voice at the other end spoke for twenty seconds before Bhavna replied. "Sure. Tomorrow morning is fine. I usually leave for work by nine thirty but I can wait for you. Do you need my address?"

Chapter 7

SEVERAL FLOORS BELOW the party that still raged on the rooftop of the Oberoi Hotel was a room dark apart from the glow of a dim lamp, and silent but for low moans from the bed. Puddled on the carpet was Devika Gulati's metallic-blue gown. Beside it a pair of boxers belonging to the Attorney General, Nalin D'Souza.

In bed the couple moved to their own urgent rhythm. Naked, Devika was on top, skin bathed in a thin film of sweat. Beneath her Nalin arched upwards each time that she ground herself into him. He reached to cup her breasts as he felt his climax approaching. Some moments later they had switched positions and he rode her with double the passion.

Spent and tired, the couple remained intertwined under the bed sheets, breathing heavily. She switched positions again, clambering on top of him in order to gaze upon his handsome features, pushing a hand through his hair.

"You've had it cut," she said.

"The other day. Do you like it?"

"It makes you look younger. Where did you go?"

"The Shiva Spa Lounge. I'm told that Mumbai's trendy young things are flocking there. Talking of which, was that a newspaper reporter I saw you with earlier?"

"An irritating woman from the *Afternoon Mirror*."

"What did she want?"

Sensing a change in him, Devika moved off him and lay with her head propped on her hand, tracing his chest hairs with her fingertips. "She wants to speak to me."

Tickled and irritated, he brushed her hand away. "Why does she want to speak to you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she teased.

But he had lost patience. "I've got to go," he said, shoving her to one side.

She pulled him back toward her and kissed him deeply, twining her tongue around his. "Sure you don't want to go again?" she asked playfully.

"I need to be back in New Delhi to prepare for a case tomorrow," he said, pulling away. "I'll give you a call sometime."

"That's crap and you know it," sneered Devika. "You will be too busy with your wife. The one who wants you to fuck her but can't inspire you to get it up."

"That's not true," said Nalin impatiently. "Her inability to produce a child has absolutely nothing

to do with any failure on my part. You should know that by now.”

~~“There are many stories about your other women,” said Devika. “It’s a bloody exhaustive list. How long before you tire of me—and what will happen to me when you do?”~~

The Attorney General smiled at her. She had one of the best bodies he had ever had the pleasure of pleasuring. Besides being beautiful, Devika was a seductress. There was an erotic charge to virtually everything she said or did. He still found it difficult to believe that she had once been in prison. What an amazing transformation.

He grasped the edge of the sheet and whipped it back, leaving Devika lying on the bed, resplendent in her nakedness. He felt the tumescence between his legs once more.

She laughed. “Don’t you need to be back in the office?” she asked.

“Fuck the office,” he snarled as he got back on top of her.

“I thought the fucking was reserved solely for me.”

Chapter 8

SANTOSH STEPPED OUT into a scorching October morning for his walk to work. He never drove. Driving meant revisiting the screeching tires and the burned-rubber smell of his nightmares.

Mumbai—once known as Bombay—was a throbbing metropolis with the attitude of New York City, the chaos of Kathmandu, the vibe of Miami, and the infrastructure of Timbuktu. It was the fifth most populous city in the world, its population nudging a little over thirteen million.

It could be charming yet repulsive. Old British monuments jostled for space with corporate glass towers and filthy slums. At traffic signals, handcart pullers slowly made their way to warehouses, their bodies bathed in sweat, while chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benzes transported their millionaire owners to luncheon meetings. Long queues of people waited patiently outside temples to catch a glimpse of their favorite deity while an equally long line of people waited to get inside the stadium for a celebration of India's alternative religion—cricket. Mumbai was a study in contrasts and people tended either to love it or to hate it. Santosh loved it when he was drunk—which was often—and hated it when he was sober.

It was a long walk but he made brisk progress on the way from Crawford Market to the Regal Cinema. Crossing the streets, he was greeted by beggars, bums, and vagabonds, as though he were a celebrity to them. A young boy wearing patched clothes smartly saluted him. Santosh nodded in reply.

“Tell your boss that I need to meet him. Chowpatty, usual day and time,” he instructed.

At the Regal Santosh turned toward Colaba Causeway, a street notorious for its pubs, pimps, and pushers, not to mention hundreds of pavement stalls selling porn DVDs, vibrators, and electronic goods smuggled in from China, Taiwan, and Dubai.

He walked a couple of blocks down the main road until he reached an old and decrepit building. The ground floor was occupied by a well-known watering hole that sold the cheapest beer in town. Tables covered in pink checkered tablecloths were occupied by an odd mix of locals and hippies, while high above them ancient ceiling fans groaned and squeaked in an unsuccessful effort to keep cool air circulating in the stifling October mugginess. Above the heads of the patrons floated a thick haze of weed smoke.

Ignoring the pub, Santosh slipped inside a nondescript side entrance that led to a flight of creaking wooden stairs. Climbing to the top floor, he stood before a battered door, locked with an ancient padlock. On either side were cream-painted walls punctuated by peeling plaster. To the right of the door was a dented mailbox and above this a small ornate mirror with a cracked frame. To the casual

observer it looked like the entrance to someone's home—and someone without much in the way of money.

However, an investigator looking closely would have found several inconsistencies. The door padlock could not be opened because there was no key slot. The apparently crumbling plaster could not be broken away. The door could not be rattled because it was entirely sealed. The mailbox was glued shut and the mirror stuck solidly to the wall, not hanging by a nail or hook.

Santosh stood in front of the mirror for a few seconds. Moments later the entire wall—with door padlock, mailbox, and mirror intact—slid open with an efficient *whoosh*, like Aladdin's cave. Santosh entered and the wall closed equally efficiently behind him.

Unknown to the casual visitor was the fact that the dilapidated mirror held within it a sophisticated retina-scan unit. Only staff members of Private India identified by the biometric system could access the office. Established clients communicated with the firm via a dedicated helpline. New clients were only accepted via referrals from old ones. Investigators from Private India visited clients at their homes and offices rather than the other way round. The offices of Private India remained invisible to the world outside.

There was a specific reason for this secrecy. Private India had helped law-enforcement agencies solve a few key cases related to deadly attacks by Pakistani terror groups on Indian soil. The result was that Private India was on the radar of several Pakistan-based jihadi outfits. It was absolutely necessary for the safety of those who worked for the company to keep the office impregnable.

Inside, the office was the exact opposite of its shabby exterior. Light maple floors, recessed illumination, silent air conditioning, and white Corian wall panels ensured that the space was a haven of light, comfort, and tranquility. A middle-aged woman sat at the reception desk handling incoming calls. Santosh waved to her as he picked up an apple from a bowl that stood on the coffee table in the lounge.

Spread over the top two floors of the building, Private India's office was accessed via the high floor containing the offices of Santosh, Nisha, Mubeen, and Hari. The lower floor contained the offices of support staff and junior investigators and could be accessed via a private elevator behind the reception desk.

All the window frames of the two floors had been preserved on the outside so that the exterior of the building retained its old and dilapidated character, but the frames had been supplemented by modern double-glazed windows on the inside.

Santosh's room straight ahead was connected to Nisha's smaller office and an oversized conference room equipped with videoconferencing and a 108-inch LCD screen. He took a bite out of his apple and headed right to Mubeen's lab.

Chapter 9

ALTHOUGH MUBEEN YUSUF was Private India's forensic expert, and thus blessed with the strongest constitution imaginable, he looked as though a gust of wind would be enough to blow him away. His shoulders were stooped, he wore his beard unfashionably straggly, and though he regularly smiled his eyes behind his spectacles were often sad.

Mubeen had been working as a forensic pathologist in Baltimore when his life had caved in.

Walking home one night with his wife and six-year-old son, a group of neo-Nazis had surrounded them, jabbing and taunting, breathing beer fumes and screaming obscenities. When the kicks and punches had begun, Mubeen had tried to protect his wife and son. Oh dear God, he'd tried. He fought like a tiger. And the last words he'd heard before he'd lost consciousness were: "Dirty India scum... go back home."

He had woken in hospital to the news that his son was dead, and after that no therapy in the world could keep him and his wife together. The guilt they had both felt at living while their son had died, had been too much for them. Until finally they'd divorced and Mubeen had yearned to return home to India.

Thanks to Jack Morgan he'd gotten his wish. A murder case had brought Mubeen into contact with Jack, who had offered him a job at Private India's new office in Mumbai. On his first day at Private India he'd met Santosh Wagh, and the eyes of his new boss were the same eyes he saw in the mirror each morning. They had never spoken about their losses, but the sense of a kindred spirit was shared.

He looked up now as Santosh approached.

"Anything for me?" asked Santosh, and Mubeen pulled away from the microscope.

"Nisha recovered a strand of hair from the bathroom floor," he replied, and Santosh nodded. "I will have compared it against a sample from the victim. It's different."

"So it should be possible to get DNA from the hair?"

Mubeen sighed. Forensic analysis of DNA was the most overhyped and misrepresented collection method. Santosh was making the same mistake most people made. They simply assumed that hair samples made ideal material for DNA testing.

"Unfortunately the successful extraction of DNA from a hair sample depends on the part of the hair that is discovered," replied Mubeen with a grim expression.

"Enlighten me," said Santosh, taking another bite of his apple.

"Hair is mainly composed of a fibrous protein known as keratin. This protein is also the primary

constituent of skin, animal hooves, and nails. The hair root lies below the scalp and is enclosed in a keratin sheath called the hair follicle. This is connected to the bloodstream via the dermal papilla. The hair shaft does not contain DNA, which is only to be found in the root.”

“So what exactly is the problem here?” asked Santosh.

“This strand of hair has been sliced through cleanly. There is no root available for analysis.”

“So this was a *cut* strand of hair?” said Santosh.

Mubeen scratched at his unkempt beard. “It would appear so. Attached to someone’s clothes perhaps?”

“Yes, unless our killer stopped to give his hair a trim,” said Santosh, thinking, then added, “Or perhaps it merely belongs to a former guest. I remember reading somewhere that in a small number of hair samples, forensic scientists are able to extract nuclear DNA from cut or shed hairs.”

Mubeen nodded. His boss always managed to spring a surprise on him whenever his knowledge was called into question. “The presence of biologically dead cells or keratinocytes in their last stage of differentiation may make it possible to extract a profile derived from nuclear DNA,” he replied. “I will take me some time to tell you whether that’s possible or not in this case. It’s highly probable that no nuclear DNA will be absent.”

“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” said Santosh. “Let me know if anything new emerges.”

Chapter 10

SANTOSH LEFT MUBEEN'S lab and walked into Hari's office. At thirty-five the youngest member of the team, Hari Padhi was Private's technology geek. If you needed a cell tracing, you went to Hari. If you needed to know the precise speed and trajectory of a naked corpse falling from the twenty-first floor of a building, then you went to Hari.

He looked somewhat like a wrestler. His chest bulged out of his shirt and his arms were thick and muscular. It was evident that he spent a substantial amount of his free time working out at the gym. His gray matter was also in peak form.

He was seated at his desk, closely examining the video feed from the hotel's camera. His workspace was fitted out with high-capacity microprocessors, surveillance equipment, GPS trackers, signal jammers, bug-sweep equipment, password-decryption software, and wiretap-detection systems. Also available to Hari was a full suite of ballistics equipment including microscopes with digital imaging capability, sensitive measuring equipment, and instrumentation to check and record surface temperature, projectile velocity, internal gun pressures, trigger characteristics, and lock time.

He was using an ultra-high-resolution monitor and a high-density time-lapse deck with a built-in time base corrector to forensically examine the video feed from the hotel.

"Any news for me?" asked Santosh.

"We checked the room for fingerprints. Most of them were of the victim or assorted members of hotel staff. I've also been looking at the CCTV, and we have a guy going in and out of the room."

"Excellent," said Santosh. "Let's see him."

Hari scooted to the place on the tape and they watched as a man first entered and then, forwarding the tape, left.

He wore a baseball cap, jeans, his hands thrust in the pockets of a jacket. Conscious of the camera, he kept his head down.

"Not much help, is it?" said Hari with a pained face.

Santosh looked at him. "Everything's a help," he said. He looked back at the screen where the man was freeze-framed as he left room 1121, certain he was looking at the killer.

Hari looked up and wordlessly scanned the footage to the point at which the baseball-cap-wearing visitor had been recorded leaving the room. "See this? The time stamp shows two minutes past nine on Sunday evening."

"So?" asked Santosh.

“Now let’s scan back further to see when he went in,” said Hari and pressed the deck’s rewind button to take the footage back by eleven minutes. “Ah, here we are. See this? Eight fifty-one p.m.”

“Yes.”

“Nisha spoke to receptionists and the doormen. Nobody remembers seeing anyone matching the description enter or leave, nor does he turn up on any of the reception CCTV.”

“So he used a back entrance?” said Santosh.

“Sort of. There’s a separate entrance from the bar at the rear of the hotel. There’s no doorman, the reception area is set back, there’s far less chance of being seen. But... they do have CCTV.”

With a showman’s flourish Hari clicked on his laptop’s desktop and a new picture appeared. Once again it showed the same figure, baseball cap on, head down, hands in pockets. Once again there was no hint of any identifying features.

“He certainly knew what he was doing,” hissed Santosh. “He must have known the location of every single camera in the place.”

“It’s frustrating, isn’t it?” agreed Hari. “Except. The image from the rear entrance is a slightly higher resolution and something caught my eye. Here...” He clicked again. “Look at the shoes.”

Santosh peered at the screen, in particular at the shoes. Expensive-looking, polished black shoes with a distinctive buckle at the sides, they were incongruous set against the baseball cap and jacket.

He straightened, nodding with satisfaction. His phone was ringing and he delved in his jacket pocket for it, gesturing from Hari to the image on the screen.

“Find those shoes,” he said, his finger hovering over the call-accept button. It was Rupesh. “Find where they’re sold and who’s bought a pair.”

Hari nodded and looked pleased with himself as Santosh answered the call. “Yes?”

“There’s been another murder,” said Rupesh. “And guess what? The victim has a yellow scarf around her neck.”

Chapter 11

THANE, A NORTHEASTERN suburb of Mumbai, was home to several large housing cooperative societies. The second body had been discovered in an apartment that was part of a gated community there.

Nisha drove past the security gate and down a long winding road surrounded by well-maintained lawns until the car reached the block that Rupesh had indicated. There were several police vehicles parked outside. Santosh, Nisha, and Mubeen got out of the car, picked up their equipment, and headed for the stairs. The police had already cordoned off the entrance to the third-floor apartment.

Rupesh was waiting for them at the doorway. “Her name is Bhavna Choksi, aged approximately thirty-seven. A journalist who worked for a tabloid—the *Afternoon Mirror*,” he explained as he led them to the bedroom where her body had been discovered.

The apartment was a compact one-bedroom unit. It was quite obvious that Bhavna Choksi was single but financially sound. The furnishings were simple yet elegant and the apartment was well organized and clean.

The body was suspended from a ceiling fan in the center of the bedroom. The room was completely still but for the barely noticeable pendulum-like movement of the corpse. Nisha shuddered.

Santosh sniffed, detecting the odor of urine. He looked down at the floor and noticed a puddle at the base of the bed. “She was strangled there,” he said. “She peed involuntarily as she was being choked. Urination or defecation are known body reactions that can be triggered by strangulation. Yes, triggered by strangulation.”

Unlike the first victim, who had been in her nightdress, the second was fully dressed in work clothes—cotton slacks and linen top—ideally suited to a journalist on the prowl in Mumbai’s hot and humid weather. The slacks were damp with urine. Around her neck was an unmistakable yellow scarf to which a rope had been attached in order to suspend her from the fan. Both her hands had string tied around them. In one hand the victim had been made to hold rosary beads, and in the other a plastic toy bucket—the sort that kids use to build sandcastles on the beach—containing a couple of inches of water.

“Who found her?” asked Santosh as he looked up at the hanging corpse.

“The cleaning lady let herself in with her key at nine thirty,” answered Rupesh. “She assumed that Bhavna Choksi had already left for work, which was the case most days.”

Santosh took advantage of the police ladder that had been placed under the fan. Handing his cane to Nisha, he climbed up several rungs so that he could look at the ligature. It was the same sort of yellow

scarf as they'd found on Kanya Jaiyen. He peered into the victim's wide-open eyes. Lifeless now, the must have been terrorized as a garrote choked the victim and deprived her lungs of air. *Eyes are the windows of the soul... reveal your soul to me, woman*, thought Santosh. *Tell me your story, Bhavna.*

"I need to swab her eyes," said Mubeen, pulling out two cotton buds from his satchel. Santosh snapped out of his trance and descended the ladder so that Mubeen could use it.

He climbed up carefully and gently swabbed each of her eyes, placing the buds into specimen tubes. "Why the eye swab?" asked Rupesh, who had never seen any of his own police medical examiners do it.

"Notice the room's temperature?" replied Mubeen as he came down the ladder and packed away the specimen buds. "The air conditioning has been left running and it's bloody freezing. I can't depend on the body's ambient temperature reading to estimate the time of death. A diagnostic machine in my lab can analyze potassium, urea, and hypoxanthine concentrations present in the vitreous humor of the eye. It provides a far more accurate estimate of time of death than basal body temperature."

"We saw the murderer on CCTV leaving Kanya Jaiyen's hotel room at two minutes past nine last night," said Santosh. "The cleaning lady discovered this victim at nine thirty this morning, leaving the murderer with a substantial window of around twelve and a half hours within which to kill a second time." He paced the room carefully. "A window of twelve and a half hours."

"Unless this second murder had actually happened before the hotel incident," argued Nisha.

Crouching down, Nisha noticed a strand of hair on the floor exactly below the hanging corpse. She pointed it out to Mubeen, who immediately bent over to pick it up with forceps and bag it.

"Hopefully a comparison with the first sample should tell us whether it comes from the same person," he said to Santosh. But Santosh's mind was elsewhere.

"This murder scene is fresh," he said softly, almost to himself. "Fresh, because the urine on his slacks is still wet, not dry, in spite of the air conditioning. This killing happened after the hotel murder, not before. And forget about the goddamned hair. It's just another annoying prop!"

"Crap!" he hissed suddenly under his breath, thumping his cane on the floor and giving everyone else around him a start. What did the objects mean? What was the killer trying to tell him? Why the single strand of hair at both murder sites? *Come out of your hiding place, bastard!*

"Unfortunately the CCTV system of the building was down owing to a technical glitch," said Rupesh. "So we cannot get a visual of the murderer. No signs of forced entry either."

"Any idea regarding the firm that handles security surveillance of the estate?" asked Santosh.

"Xilon Security Services," replied Rupesh. "They were in the process of sending over an engineer to rectify the fault, but obviously it wasn't soon enough."

"In all probability," said Nisha, "the victim knew her killer and allowed the murderer access, given that there are no signs of forced entry."

Santosh pointed to Bhavna Choksi's desk. "There's a cell phone and a laptop. Get Hari to examine both of them. Let's find out the last story that Bhavna Choksi worked on. Maybe she ruffled someone's feathers?"

Turning to Rupesh, Santosh asked, "Do I have your permission to take over the case, assuming that the two crimes are related?"

"Why on earth would I have called you here if I didn't think they were connected?" replied Rupesh, placing a rather generous pinch of premium black-market chewing tobacco in the corner of his mouth.

Rupesh stared at the suspended body while chewing his tobacco. In his mind he saw a naked woman. Beaten black and blue, subsequently raped. Repeatedly humiliated and violated until she died. Death was a wonderful balm indeed... Rupesh snapped back into the present when he realized that

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