

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Case of the Missing Servant

Tarquin Hall

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## About the Book

Meet Vish Puri, India's most private investigator. Portly, persistent and unmistakably Punjabi, he cuts a determined swathe through modern India's criminal classes.

Able assisted by his undercover operatives, Tubelight, Flush and Facecream, he ingeniously combines modern techniques with principles of detection established in India more than two thousand years ago — long before 'that Johnny-come-lately' Sherlock Holmes.

In hot and dusty Delhi, his routine work comes from screening prospective marriage partners. But when lawyer Ajay Kasliwal is accused of killing his maidservant, Puri's resources are properly put to the test. How will he trace the fate of the girl, known only as Mary, in a population of more than one billion? Who is taking pot shots at him and his prize chilli plants? And why is his mother insisting on playing sleuth too, when everyone knows Mummies are not detectives?

The search for Mary takes him to the desert oasis of Jaipur and the remote mines of Jharkhand. From the well-heeled Gymkhana Club to the over-crowded slums, Puri's surprising adventures reveal India in all its complexity.

## About the Author

Writer and journalist Tarquin Hall has lived and worked in much of South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the US. He is the author of *Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits: Adventures of an Under-age Journalist*; *To the Elephant Graveyard*; and *Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End*. He is married to the journalist Anu Anand and lives in Delhi. For more information visit his website [www.tarquinhall.com](http://www.tarquinhall.com).

TARQUIN  
HALL  
THE  
CASE OF THE  
MISSING  
SERVANT



arrow books

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Grandpa Briggs*

## *One*

VISH PURI, FOUNDER and managing director of Most Private Investigators Ltd. sat alone in a room in a guesthouse in Defence Colony, south Delhi, devouring a dozen green chilli *pakor*as from a greasy takeaway box.

Puri was supposed to be keeping off the fried foods and Indian desserts he so loved. Dr Mohan had 'intimated' to him at his last check-up that he could no longer afford to indulge himself with the usual Punjabi staples.

'Blood pressure is up, so chance of heart attack and diabetes is there. Don't do obesity,' he'd advised.

Puri considered the doctor's stern warning as he sank his teeth into another hot, crispy *pakora* and his taste buds thrilled to the tang of salty batter, fiery chilli and the tangy, red chutney in which he had drowned the illicit snack. He derived a perverse sense of satisfaction from defying Dr Mohan's orders.

Still, the fifty-one-year-old detective shuddered to think what his wife would say if she found out he was eating between meals - especially 'outside' food that had not been prepared by her own hands (or at least by one of the servants).

Keeping this in mind, he was careful not to get any incriminating grease spots on his clothes. And once he had finished his snack and disposed of the takeaway box, he washed the chutney off his hands and checked beneath his manicured nails and between his teeth for any tell-tale residue. Finally he popped some *sonf* into his mouth to freshen his breath.



All the while, Puri kept an eye on the house across the way and the street below.

By Delhi standards, it was a quiet and exceptionally clean residential street. Defence Colony's elitist, upper middle-class residences - army officers, doctors, engineers, *babus* and the occasional *press-wallah* - had ensured that their gated community remained free of industry, commerce and the usual human detritus. Residents could take a walk through the well-swept streets or idle in the communal gardens without fear of being hassled by disfigured beggars ... or having to negotiate their way around arc welders soldering lengths of metal on the pavements ... or halal butchers slaughtering chickens.

Most of the families in Defence Colony were Punjabi and had arrived in New Delhi as refugees following the catastrophic partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. As their affluence and numbers had grown over the decades, they had built cubist cement villas surrounded by high perimeter walls and imposing wrought iron gates.

Each of these mini-fiefdoms employed an entire company of servants. The residents of number 76, D Block, the house that Puri was watching, retained the services of no fewer than seven full-time people - two drivers, a cook, a cleaner-cum-laundry-maid, a bearer and two security guards. Three of these employees were 'live-in' and shared the *barsaati* on the roof. The overnight security guard slept in the sentry box positioned outside the front gate, though strictly speaking, he really wasn't meant to.

The family also relied on a part-time dishwasher, a sweeper, a gardener and the local pressing-wallah who had a stand under the neem tree down the street where he applied a heavy iron filled with hot coals to a dizzying assortment of garments, including silk saris, cotton *salwars* and denim jeans.

From the vantage point in the room Puri had rented, he could see the dark-skinned cleaner-cum-laundry-maid on

the roof of number 76, hanging underwear on the washing line. The *mali* was on the first-floor balcony watering the potted plants. The sweeper was using up gallons of precious water hosing down the marble forecourt. And, out in the street, the cook was inspecting the green chillis being sold by a local costermonger who pushed a wooden cart through the neighbourhood, periodically calling out, '*Subzi-wallah!*'

Puri had positioned two of his best undercover operatives, Tubelight and Flush, down in the street.

These were not their real names, of course. Being Punjabi, the detective had nicknames for most of his employees, relatives and close friends. For example, he called his wife Rumpi; his new driver, Handbrake; and the office boy, who was extraordinarily lazy, Door Stop.

Tubelight was so-named because he was a heavy sleeper and took a while to flicker into life in the morning. The forty-three-year-old hailed from a clan of hereditary thieves, and therefore had been highly adept at cracking locks, safes and ignitions since childhood.

As for Flush, he had a flush toilet in his home, a first for anyone in his remote village in the state of Haryana. An electronics and computer whiz, during his career with Indian intelligence he had once managed to place a microscopic bug inside the Pakistani ambassador's dentures.

The other member of the team, Facecream, was waiting a few miles away and would play a crucial part in the operation later that evening. A beautiful and feisty Nepali woman who had run away from home as a teenager to join the Maoists, but became disillusioned with the cause and escaped to India, she often worked undercover - one day posing as a street sweeper; the next as irresistible bait in a honeytrap.

Puri himself was known by various names.

His father had always addressed him by his full name, Vishwas, which the detective had later shortened to Vish because it rhymes with 'wish' (and 'Vish Puri' could be taken to mean 'granter of wishes'). But the rest of his family and friends knew him as Chubby, an affectionate rather than a derisive sobriquet - although as Dr Mohan had pointed out so indelicately, he did need to lose about thirty pounds.

Puri insisted on being called Boss by his employees, which helped remind them who was in charge. In India, it was important to keep a strong chain of command; people were used to hierarchy and they responded to authority. As he was fond of saying, 'You can't have every Johnny thinking he's a Nelson, no?'

The detective reached for his walkie-talkie and spoke into it.

'What's that Charlie up to, over?' he said.

'Still doing timepass, Boss,' replied Flush. There was a pause before he remembered to add the requisite 'over.'

Flush, who was thirty-two, skinny and wore thick, milk-bottle-bottom glasses, was sitting in the back of Puri's Hindustan Ambassador monitoring the bugs the team had planted inside the target's home earlier, as well as all incoming and outgoing phone calls. Meanwhile, Tubelight, who was middle aged with henna-dyed hair and blind in one eye, was disguised as an autorickshaw-wallah in oily clothes and rubber *chappals*. Crouched on his haunches on the side of the street among a group of *bidi*-smoking local drivers, he was gambling at cards.

Puri, a self-confessed master of disguise, had not changed into anything unusual for today's operation, though seeing him for the first time, you might have been forgiven for thinking this was not the case. His military moustache, first grown when he was a recruit in the army, was waxed and curled at the ends. He was wearing one of his trademark tweed Sandown caps, imported from Bates

of Jermyn Street in Piccadilly, and a pair of prescription aviator sunglasses.

Now that it was November and the intense heat of summer had subsided, he had also opted for his new grey safari suit. It had been made for him, as all his shirts and suits were, by Mr M. A. Pathan of Connaught Place, whose grandfather had often dressed Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan.

'A *pukka* Savile Row finish if ever I saw one,' said the detective to himself, admiring the cut in a mirror in the empty room. 'Really tip top.'

The suit was indeed perfectly tailored for his short, tubby frame. The silver buttons with the stag emblems were especially fetching.

Puri sat down in his canvas chair and waited. It was only a matter of time before Ramesh Goel made his move. Everything the detective had learned about the young man suggested that he would not be able to resist temptation.

The two had come face to face on Day One of the operation when Puri had entered number 76, the Goel family residence, disguised as a telephone repairman. That encounter, however brief, had told the detective all he needed to know. Ramesh Goel, who had spiky hair and walked with a swagger, lacked moral fibre. It was the same with so many young, middle-class people these days. Infidelity was rife, divorce rates were on the up, elderly parents were being abused and abandoned in old people's homes, sons no longer understood their responsibilities to their parents or society as a whole.

'Many thousands of males and females are working in call centres and IT sector side by side and they are becoming attached and going in for one-night stands,' Puri had written in his latest letter to the *Times of India*, which the honourable editor had seen fit to publish. 'In this environment, in which males and females are thrust together without proper family supervision or moral code,

peer group pressure is at the highest level. Even young females are going in for pre-marital affairs, extramarital affairs – even extra, extramarital affairs. So much infidelity is there that many marriages are getting over.’

American influence was to blame with its emphasis on materialism, individuality and lack of family values.

‘A fellow is no longer happy serving society. *Dharma*, duty, has been ejected out of the window. Now the average male wants five-star living: Omega watch, Italian hotel food, Dubai holiday, luxury apartment, a fancy girl on the side,’ Puri had written. ‘All of a sudden, young Indians are adopting the habits of *goras*, white people.’

Sixty years after Gandhi-ji sent them packing, Mother India was, being conquered by outsiders again.

‘Boss, Flush this side, over.’ The voice broke into the detective’s private lament.

‘Boss this side, over,’ replied the detective.

‘Mouse made contact, Boss. Leaving shortly, over.’ ‘Mouse’ was code for Goel.

The detective made his way as quickly as he could down into the street and, a little short of breath after his exertion on the stairs, joined Flush in the back of the waiting Ambassador.

Tubelight folded his hand of cards, made a hasty apology to the other drivers, collected up his winnings (nearly sixty rupees; not bad for an hour’s work), and revved up the three-wheeler he had rented for the day from his cousin Bhagat.

A few minutes later, the gates to the Goel residence swung open and a red Indica hatchback pulled out. The vehicle turned right. Tubelight waited five seconds and then followed. Puri’s Ambassador, with Handbrake at the wheel, was not far behind.

The team kept a safe distance as Goel sped along the old Ring Road. There was little doubt in the detective’s mind where his mark was heading.

'This Charlie might be having *Angrezi* education, but he is like a moth to Vish Puri's flame,' he said with a grin.

Flush, who held his employer in high regard and had learned to tolerate his boastfulness, replied, 'Yes Boss.'

The Ambassador and the *auto* took turns tailing the Indica through the streets of south Delhi, the rush hour traffic helping the team remain inconspicuous. Cars, motorcycles, scooters, cyclists, bicycle rickshaws, trucks, hand-pushed carts, bullock carts, sacred cows and the occasional unroadworthy hybrid vehicle that defied description vied for space on the road. Like bumper cars at a fairground, vehicles cut across one another, drivers inching into any space that presented itself, making four and a half lanes out of three. Horns blared constantly, a clamour as jarring as a primary school brass band. Loudest of all were the Blueline buses. Driven by charas-smoking maniacs who were given financial incentives for picking up the most passengers, even if they ended up killing or maiming some of them. 'Bloody *goondas*,' Puri called them. But he knew that the harshest penalty these men would ever face was a few hours in a police station drinking *chai*. Politicians and babus owned all the buses and had the police in their pockets. The going rate for expunging the record of a 'manslaughter' charge was about three thousand rupees.

The detective watched one of these battered Blueline buses lumbering through the traffic like an old wounded war elephant, its sides scarred by previous battles. Faces peered down from the scratched windows - some with curiosity, others with envy and perhaps contempt - into the plush interiors of the many thousands of new luxury sedans on Delhi's roads. For the have-nots, here was a glimpse of the lifestyle that hundreds of thousands of the nouveau riches had adopted. For Puri, the scene was a reminder of the widening economic disparity in Indian society.

'Mouse is turning right, Boss,' said Handbrake.

Puri nodded. 'Tubelight, keep ahead of him,' he said into his walkie-talkie. 'We'll keep back, over.'

Goel's Indica passed over the new spaghetti junction of 'overbridges' in front of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and continued in the direction of Sarojini Nagar. Had it not been for the occasional ancient tomb or monument - echoes of Delhi's previous incarnations, now jammed between all the concrete and reflective glass - Puri would not have recognised the place.

In his childhood, Delhi had been slow-moving and provincial. But in the past ten years Puri had watched the city race off in all directions, spreading east and south, with more roads, cars, malls and apartment blocks springing up each day. The dizzying prosperity attracted millions of uneducated and unskilled villagers into the capital from impoverished states across north India. With the population explosion - now 16 million and rising - came a dramatic increase in crime. The vast conglomeration of Old Delhi, New Delhi and its many suburbs had been officially renamed the National Capital Region - or the 'National Crime Region', as most newspapers wrote mockingly.

For Puri, this meant more work. Most Private Investigators Ltd. had never been busier. Still, the business was not all welcome. There were days when the detective found his natural optimism waning. Sometimes he would battle home through the honking gridlock wondering if perhaps he should turn his hand to social work.

His dear wife, Rumpi, always reminded Puri that India was making great progress and talked him out of throwing in the towel. She would point out that he was already doing the public a service. His current investigation was but one example. He was on the brink of saving a young woman from a terrible fate and bringing an unscrupulous individual to account.

Yes, it would not be long now before Ramesh Goel was brought to book. Puri would have him in another ten minutes or so.

The detective made sure Handbrake remained three cars behind the Indica on the last leg of his journey down Africa Avenue to Safdarjung Enclave. Predictably, the young man turned into A Block.

Unbeknownst to Goel, as he pulled up outside A 2/12 - 'Boss, he's at A-two-oblique-twelve, over' - he was being filmed with a long lens from a nearby vantage point. It made no difference that he was wearing a baseball cap, sunglasses and a dark raincoat in an effort to disguise himself. Nor that he was using the alias Romey Butter.

Vish Puri had got his man.



## *Two*

THE DETECTIVE WAS not looking forward to the conclusion of the Ramesh Goel case. It rarely gave him any satisfaction to convey bad news to a client, especially such a successful and powerful man as Sanjay Singla.

'But what to do?' Puri said to Elizabeth Rani, his loyal secretary, who had worked for him since Most Private Investigators had opened above Bahri Sons bookshop in Khan Market in south Delhi, in 1988.

'I tell you, Madam Rani, it's a good thing Sanjay Singla came to me,' he added. 'Just think of the bother I've saved him. That bloody Ramesh Goel would have made off with a fortune! A most slippery fellow if ever I met one. Undoubtedly!'

Elizabeth Rani, a stolid widow whose husband had been killed in a traffic accident in 1987 leaving her with three children to provide for, did not have a head for mysteries, intrigue or conspiracies, and often found herself lost in all the ins and outs of his many investigations - especially given that Puri was usually working on two or three at a time. Her job required her to keep Boss's diary, answer the phones, manage the files and make sure Door Stop, the office boy, didn't steal the milk and sugar.

Unofficially, it was also Elizabeth Rani's remit to listen patiently to Puri's expositions and, from time to time, give his ego a gentle massage.

'Such a good job you have done, sir,' she said, placing the Ramesh Goel file on Puri's desk. 'My sincerest compliments.'

The detective grinned from his executive swivel chair.

'You are too kind, Madam Rani!' he answered. 'But as usual, you are correct. I don't mind admitting this operation was first class. Conceived and carried out with the utmost professionalism and secrecy. Another successful outcome for Most Private Investigators!'

Elizabeth Rani waited patiently until he had finished congratulating himself before giving Puri his messages.

'Sir, a certain Ajay Kasliwal called saying he wishes to consult on a most urgent matter. He proposes to meet at the Gym tonight at seven o'clock. Shall I confirm?'

'He gave any reference?'

'He's knowing Bunty Bannerjee.'

A smile came over the detective's face at the mention of his old friend and *batchmate* at the military academy.

'Most certainly I'll see him,' he said. 'Tell Kasliwal I'll reach at seven come rain or shine.'

Elizabeth Rani withdrew from the office and sat down behind her desk in reception.

Her tea mug was halfway to her lips when she heard a knock at the door. Apart from the various clients coming into Most Private Investigators Ltd., there was a small army of wallahs, or people charged with specific tasks vital to the rhythm of everyday Indian life. Ms Rani found the lime and chilli woman at the door and remembered it was Monday. For three rupees per week, the woman would come and hang a fresh string of three green chillies and a lime above the door of each business in the market to ward off evil spirits. Ms Rani was also in charge of paying the local *hijras* during the festival season when they approached all the businesses in the market and demanded *bakshish*; and ensured that the local brass plaque polisher kept the sign on the wall next to the doorbell shiny. It read:

MOST PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS LTD.  
VISH PURI, MANAGING DIRECTOR, CHIEF

OFFICER AND WINNER OF ONE  
INTERNATIONAL AND SIX NATIONAL AWARDS  
'CONFIDENTIALITY IS OUR WATCHWORD'

Meanwhile, Puri turned his attention to the evidence he had compiled against Ramesh Goel and, having satisfied himself that everything was in order, prepared for the imminent arrival of his client, Sanjay Singla.

Reaching into his drawer for his face mirror, he inspected his moustache, curling the ends between his fingers. His Sandown cap, which he only ever took off in the privacy of his bedroom, also required adjustment. Next, he glanced around the room to check that everything was exactly as it should be.

There was nothing fancy about the small office. Unlike the new breed of young detectives with their leather couches, pine veneer desks and glass partitions, Puri remained faithful to the furniture and décor dating back to his agency's opening in the late 1980s (he liked to think that it spoke of experience, old-fashioned reliability and a certain rare character).

He kept a number of artefacts pertaining to some of his most celebrated cases on display. Amongst them was a truncheon presented to him by the Gendarmerie Nationale in recognition of his invaluable help in locating the French ambassador's wife (and for being so discreet about her dalliance with the embassy cook). But pride of place on the wall behind his antique desk belonged to the Super Sleuth plaque presented to him in 1999 by the World Federation of Detectives for solving The Case of the Missing Polo Elephant.

The room's focal point, however, was the shrine in the far corner. Two portraits hung above it, both of them draped in strings of fresh marigolds. The first was a likeness of Puri's guru, the philosopher-statesman, Chanakya, who lived 300 years before Christ and founded

the arts of espionage and investigation. The second was a photograph of the detective's late father, Om Chander Puri, posing in his police uniform on the day in 1963 when he was made a detective.

Puri was staring up at the portrait of his Papa-ji and musing over some of the invaluable lessons his father had taught him when Elizabeth Rani's voice came over the intercom.

'Sir, Singla-ji has come.'

Without replying, the detective pressed a buzzer under his desk; this activated the security lock on his door and it swung open. A moment later, his client strode into his office - tall, confident, reeking of Aramis.

Puri met his visitor halfway, shaking him by the hand. '*Namashkar*, sir,' he said. 'So kind of you to come. Please take a seat.'

Puri sounded obsequious, but he was not in the least bit intimidated at having such a distinguished man in his office. The deference he showed his client was purely out of respect for hierarchy. Singla was at least five years his senior and one of the richest industrialists in the country.

Private detectives on the other hand were not held in great esteem in Indian society, ranking little higher than security guards. Partly this was because many were con men and blackmail artists who were prepared to sell their aunties for a few thousand rupees. Mostly it was because the private investigation business was not a traditional career like medicine or engineering and people did not have an appreciation - or respect - for the tremendous skills that the job required. So Singla talked to Puri as he might to a middle manager.

'Tell me,' he said in a booming voice, adjusting his French cuffs.

The detective chose not to begin immediately. 'Some chai, sir?'

Singla made a gesture with his hands as if he was brushing away a fly.

‘Some water?’

‘Nothing,’ he said impatiently. ‘Let us come to the point. No delay. What you have found? Nothing bad, I hope. I like this young man, Puri, and I pride myself on being an excellent judge of character. Ramesh reminds me of myself when I was a young man. A real go-getter.’

Singla had made it clear to Puri during their first meeting a fortnight earlier that he had reservations about commissioning an investigation. ‘This spying business is a dirty game,’ he’d said.

But in the interest of his daughter, he’d agreed to make use of the detective’s services. After all, Singla did not really know Ramesh Goel. Nor Goel’s family.

How could he?

Up until two months ago, they – the Singlas and the Goels – had never met. And in India, marriage was always about much more than the union between a boy and a girl. It was also about two families coming together.

In the old days, there would have been no need for Puri’s services. Families got to know one another within the social framework of their own communities. When necessary, they did their own detective work. Mothers and aunties would ask neighbours and friends about prospective brides and grooms, and their families’ standing and reputation. Priests would also make introductions and match horoscopes.

Today, well-off Indians living in cities could no longer rely on those time-honoured systems. Many no longer knew their neighbours. Their homes were the walled villas of Jor Bagh and Golf Links, or posh apartment blocks in Greater Kailash. Their social lives revolved around the office, business functions and society weddings.

And yet the arranged marriage remained sacrosanct. Even among the wealthiest Delhi families, few parents gave

their blessing to a 'love marriage', even when the couples belonged to the same religion and caste. It was still considered utterly disrespectful for a child to find his or her own mate. After all, only a parent had the wisdom and foresight necessary for such a vital and delicate task. Increasingly, Indians living in major towns and cities relied on newspaper ads and internet websites to find spouses for their children.

The Singlas' advertisement in the *Indian Express* had read as follows:

SOUTH DELHI HIGH STATUS AGRAWAL BUSINESS FAMILY SEEKS ALLIANCE FOR THEIR HOMELY, SLIM, SWEET-NATURED, VEGETARIAN AND CULTURED DAUGHTER. 5'1". 50 KG. WHEATISH COMPLEXION. MBA FROM USA. NON-MANGLIK. DOB: JULY '83 (LOOKS MUCH YOUNGER). ENGAGED IN BUSINESS BUT NOT INCLINED TO PROFESSIONAL CAREER. BOY MAIN CONSIDERATION. LOOKING FOR PROFESSIONALLY QUALIFIED DOCTOR/INDUSTRIALIST BOY FROM DELHI OR OVERSEAS. PLS SEND BIODATA, PHOTO, HOROSCOPE. CALL IN CONFIDENCE.

Ramesh Goel's parents had seen the advertisement and applied, providing a detailed personal history and a headshot of their son.

At twenty-nine, he ticked all the boxes. He was an Agrawal and Cambridge-educated. His family was not fabulously wealthy (Goel's father was a doctor), but for the Singlas, caste and social status were the main concern.

From the start, their daughter, Vimi, liked the look of Ramesh Goel. When she was shown his headshot, she cooed, 'So handsome, no?' Soon after, the two families had tea at the Singlas' mansion in Sundar Nagar. The rendezvous was a success. The parents got along and provided their consent for Vimi and Ramesh to spend time together unchaperoned. The two went out on a couple of dates, once to a restaurant, a few days later to a bowling

alley. The following week, they agreed to marry. Subsequently, astrologers were consulted and a date and time was set for the wedding.

But with less than a month before the big day, Sanjay Singla, acting on the advice of a sensible friend, decided to have Goel screened. That was where Puri had come into the picture.

During their initial meeting at Singla's office, the detective had done his best to assure the industrialist that he was doing the right thing.

'You would not invite a stranger into your house. Why invite any Tom, Dick or Harry into your family?' he'd said.

The detective had told Singla about some of the cases he had handled in the past. Only recently, he'd run a standard background check on a Non-Resident Indian living in London who was betrothed to a Chandigarh businessman's daughter and discovered that he was a charlatan. Neelesh Anand of Woodford was not, as he claimed, the owner of the Empress of India on the Romford Road, but a second-order *balti* cook!

As Puri had put it to Singla: 'Had I not unmasked this bloody goonda then he would have made off with the dowry and never been heard of again, leaving the female in disgrace.'

By disgrace he'd meant married, childless and living back at home with her parents - or worse: on her own.

Of course, the Anand case had been a straightforward investigation, a simple matter of calling up his old friend, retired Scotland Yard inspector Ian Masters, and asking him to head down to Upton Park in east London for a curry. Most pre-matrimonial cases that came Puri's way - there were so many now, he was having to turn them away - were simple.

The Goel investigation, however, had been far more involved. Singla had been persuaded to commission the Pre-Matrimonial Five-Star Comprehensive Service, the

most expensive package Most Private Investigators provided. Even Ramesh Goel's parents' financial dealings and records had been scrutinised by forensic accountants.

The file now lying on Puri's desk was testimony to the long hours that had gone into the case. It was thick with bank statements, phone records and credit card bills, all acquired through less than legitimate channels.

There was nothing in the family's financial dealings to raise suspicion. It was the photographic evidence that proved so damning.

Puri laid a series of pictures on the desk for his client to see. Together they told a story. Two nights ago, Goel had gone to a five-star hotel nightclub with a couple of male friends. On the dance floor, he had bumped into Facecream, who'd been dressed in a short leather skirt, a skimpy top and high heels. The two had danced together and, afterwards, Goel had offered to buy her a drink, introducing himself as Romey Butter. At first she'd refused, but Goel had insisted.

'Come on, baby, I'll get your engine running,' he'd told her.

The two had downed a couple of tequila slammers and danced again, this time intimately. At the end of the evening, Facecream, going under the name Candy, had given Goel her phone number.

'On the coming night, he set out for the female's apartment at two oblique twelve, A Block, Safdarjung Enclave,' Puri told Singla. 'Inside, he consumed two *pegs* of whisky and got frisky with the female. He said - and I quote - "Wanna see my big thing, baby?" Then he got down his trousers. Unfortunately for him, the female, Candy, had dissolved one knockout drug in his drink and, forthwith, he succumbed, passing out.'

An hour later, Goel awoke naked and in bed, convinced that he had made love to Candy, who assured him that he was 'the best she'd ever had'.



Lying next to her, Goel confessed that he was getting married at the end of the month. He called his fiancée, Vimi Singla, a 'stupid bitch' and a 'dumb brat' and proposed that Candy become his mistress.

'He said, "I'll soon be rich, baby. I'll get you whatever you want."'

The detective handed the last photograph to his client. It showed Goel leaving Candy's apartment with a big grin on his face.

'Sir, there is more,' said Puri. 'We have done background checking into Goel's qualifications. It is true he attended Cambridge. Three years he spent there. But he never so much as saw one university lecture. Actually, he attended Cambridge Polytechnic and concerned himself with drink and chasing females.'

The detective paused for breath.

'Sir,' he continued, 'as I intimated to you previously, my job is gathering facts and presenting evidence. That is all. I'm a most private investigator in every sense. Confidentiality is my watchword. Rest assured our dealings will remain in the strictest confidence.'

Puri sat back in his chair and waited for Singla's reaction. It came a moment later, not in English, but Hindi.

*'Saala, maaderchod!'*

With that, the industrialist gathered up the photographs and roughly shoved them back into their file. 'Send me your bill, Puri,' he said over his shoulder as he headed for the door.

'Certainly, sir. And if I can ever be ...'

But the industrialist was gone.

No doubt he was heading home to call off the wedding.

From everything Puri had read in the society pages, his client would be out of pocket by *crores* and *crores*. No doubt the Umaid Bhavan Palace in Jodhpur was already paid for. So, too, Céline Dion and the Swarovski crystal fountains.

The detective heaved a sigh. Next time he hoped the Singla family would consult with Most Private Investigators before they sent out four thousand gold-leaf embossed invitations.

## *Three*

THE RUBBER SOLES of Puri's new shoes squeaked on the marble floors of the Gymkhana Club reception. The noise caused Sunil, the *incharge*, to look up from behind the front desk. He was holding a phone to his ear and murmuring mechanically into it, '*Ji* madam, o-kay madam, no problem madam.' He gave the detective a weary nod, placing the palm of one hand over the receiver.

'Sir. One gentleman is waiting your kind attention,' he said in a hushed voice.

It was not unusual for a prospective client to ask to meet Puri at the club. The prominent members of society who came to him often guarded their privacy and preferred not to be seen coming and going from the detective's offices.

'Mr Ajay Kasliwal is it?' asked Puri.

'Yes, sir. Thirty minutes back only he reached.'

The detective acknowledged this information with a nod and turned to look at the noticeboard. The club secretary, Col. P. V. S. Gill (Retd.), had posted a new announcement. It was typed on the club's headed paper and, in no fewer than five places, blemished with whitener.

### NOTICE

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SHIRT AND A BUSH  
SHIRT IS CLARIFIED AS UNDER:  
UNLIKE A SHIRT THE DESIGN OF THE UPPER PORTION  
OF THE BUSH SHIRT IS LIKE THAT OF A SAFARI.

This made instant sense to Puri (as he believed it should to anyone coming to the club wearing bush shirts or indeed safaris) and his eyes turned to the next notice, a reminder from the under-secretary that *ayahs* were not permitted on the tennis courts. The chief librarian had also posted a note appealing for funds to replace the club's copy of the collected works of Rabindranath Tagore, which had 'most unfortunately and due to unforeseen and regrettable circumstance' been 'totally destroyed' by rats.

Next, the detective cast a quick eye over the dinner menu. It was Monday, which meant mulligatawny soup or Russian salad for starters; a choice of egg curry, cabbage bake with French Frie or Shepard's Pie for mains; and the usual tutti-frutti ice-cream or mango trifle for dessert.

The thought of Shepard's Pie followed by tutti-frutti ice-cream stirred the detective's appetite and he regretted not having come over to the club for lunch. As per Dr Mohan's instructions, Rumpi was packing his *tiffin* with only weak *daal*, rice and chopped salad these days.

Finally, Puri turned to the list of new applicants for club membership. He read each name in turn. Most he recognised: the sons and daughters of existing members. The others he jotted down in his notebook.

As a favour to Col. P. V. S. Gill (Retd.), Puri ran background checks on anyone applying for membership not already known in the right Delhi circles. Usually this meant making a couple of discreet phone calls, a service Puri gladly provided the Gym for free. Standards had to be kept up, after all. Recently, a number of Johnny-come-lately types had made applications. Just last month, a liquor *crorepati*, a multimillionaire, had asked to join. Puri had been right to flag him. Only yesterday, the man had been featured in the social pages of the *Hindustan Times* for buying the country's first Ferrari.

The detective slipped his notebook back into the inner pocket of his safari suit and made his way out of reception.

Usually he reached the bar by cutting through the ballroom. This route avoided the main office, which was the domain of Mrs Col. P. V. S. Gill (Retd.). A bossy, impossible woman who ran the club while her husband played cards in the Rummy Room, she regarded Puri as an upstart. He was, after all, the son of a lowly policeman from west Delhi who had only gained entry to the hallowed establishment through Rumpi, whose father, a retired colonel, had made him a member.

Unfortunately, the ballroom was being decorated - a dozen paint-splattered decorators working on bamboo scaffolds bound with rope, were applying lashings of the only colour used on every exterior and interior wall of the Gym: brilliant white - and so Puri was left with no choice but to take the corridor that led past Mrs Gill's door.

He proceeded slowly, painfully aware of his new squeaking shoes, specially made for him to account for the shortness of his left leg. He passed the Bridge Room and the ladies' cloakroom and a row of prints of English country scenes depicting tall, upright gentlemen in top hats and tails.

As he passed Mrs Gill's office, he went on tiptoe, but the door immediately swung open as if she had been lying in wait.

'What is all this squeaking, Mr Puri?' she screeched, her flabby midriff bulging from the folds of her garish *sari*. 'Making quite a racket.'

'My new shoes I'm afraid, madam,' he said.

Mrs Gill looked down at the offending footwear disapprovingly.

'Mr Puri, there are strict rules governing footwear,' she said. 'Rule number twenty-nine paragraph D is most specific! Hard shoes are to be worn at all times.'

'They are orthopaedic shoes, madam,' he explained.

'What nonsense!' Mrs Gill said. 'Hard shoes only!'