



A

Vish Puri

Mystery

'These books are little gems. They are beautifully written, amusing, and intensely readable.'

**Alexander McCall Smith**

The Case of the  
**Deadly Butter  
Chicken**

**Tarquin Hall**

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## About the Book

Vish Puri, the gormandizing, spectacularly mustachioed sleuth finds himself on his most daring assignment yet, infiltrating the dangerous world of illegal gambling to solve the murder of a high-profile Pakistani on Indian soil.

During a post-match dinner the elderly father of a top Pakistani cricketer playing in a new multi-million-dollar cricket tournament dies. His butter chicken has been poisoned.

To solve the case, Puri must crack the continent's mafias, following a trail that leads deep into the heart of Pakistan – a country holding dark significance in Puri's own family history.

The answer to the mystery seems within reach when Puri discovers that there is one person who can identify the killer.

Unfortunately it is the one woman in the world with whom he has sworn never to work: his Mummy-ji.

## About the Author

Tarquin Hall is a writer and journalist who has lived and worked in much of South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the US. Tarquin first went to India in the mid 1990s where he met his wife, journalist Anu Anand. They now live in Delhi with their two children. He is the author of several non-fiction works and two other Vish Puri stories, *The Case of the Missing Servant* and *The Case of the Man Who Died Laughing*.

Also by Tarquin Hall

From the Files of Vish Puri, India's Most Private Investigator

*The Case of the Missing Servant*  
*The Case of the Man Who Died Laughing*

Non-fiction

*Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits:*  
Adventures of an Under-age Journalist

*To the Elephant Graveyard:*  
A True Story of the Hunt for a Man-killing Indian Elephant

*Salaam Brick Lane:*  
A Year in the New East End

# The Case of the Deadly Butter Chicken

From the Files of Vish Puri, India's Most  
Private Investigator

Tarquin Hall

Hutchinson

London

*For Ax and the childhood we spent together*



# ONE

STRIPPED DOWN TO his undergarments and tweed Sandown cap, Vish Puri stepped on to his wife's old set of bathroom weighing scales. He watched with apprehension as the needle jerked violently to the right and settled on 91 kilos.

'By God,' the detective muttered to himself. 'One extra kilo is there. She is going to kill me - certainly if not totally.'

He tried lifting one foot off the pressure pad and shifted his weight to see if it made a difference. It didn't.

'Well, nothing for it,' he said with a sigh, stepping back on to the floor.

Puri checked that the bedroom door was locked, picked up the scales and turned them over. He removed the bottom panel, exposing the crude mechanism inside. Then he squeezed the pressure pad between his knees. When the needle reached 90, he jammed a wooden peg into one of the cogs.

The scales could now register only one weight: 90 kilos.

'Hearties congratulations Mr Puri, *saar!*' he told himself with a smile after double-checking his handiwork. 'Diet is coming along most splendidly.'

Still the detective knew that he'd bought himself a week or two at the most. Eventually all the lapses of the past fortnight would catch up with him - for lapses read numerous chicken frankies; five or six kathi rolls (he had been on a stakeout; what else was he supposed to eat?) and a significant portion of the Gymkhana Club Sunday brunch buffet (the Pinky Pinky pudding had been irresistible).

He was going to have to lose at least a token amount of weight - enough to keep Rumpi and that bloody Dr Mohan

off his back.

Fortunately, he believed he had found the answer to his prayers: diet pills. According to a flyer that had been stuffed under the windscreen wiper of his car, these promised 'miraculous and exceptional results!'

Puri fished out the flyer from his trouser pocket and read it again just to check that his eyes hadn't deceived him. 'Tired of being a big *motu*, but want to enjoy your *gulab jamuns*?' he read. 'ZeroCal is the answer! It contains a special fibre that absorbs fat molecules and converts them into a form the human system doesn't absorb. So now you can carry on getting your *just desserts*!'

Puri chuckled to himself. 'Just desserts,' he said. 'Very good.'

He stuffed the flyer back into his trouser pocket as footsteps sounded on the top of the stairs. They were accompanied by his wife's voice: 'Chubby? Are you ready? We had better get a move on, no? There are bound to be traffic snarls.'

The detective went to the door and opened it.

'What have you been doing in here?' asked Rumpi as she entered the room. 'Don't tell me you were listening in on the servants again with one of your bugs. You know I don't like it when you do that, Chubby.'

'Just I was weighing myself, actually.'

'And?'

Puri stepped gingerly back on to the scales, one foot at a time. They gave a creak, but the peg held.

'Hmm. Ninety kilos,' she read. 'So you've lost . . . three quarters of one kilo. It's something at least. But so far I don't see any improvement.'

She looked her husband up and down, scrutinising his stomach, which bulged out beneath his cotton undershirt like a lumpy pillow.

'You still look . . . well, if anything I would say you've got a little *larger*, Chubby.'

‘Must be your eyesight, my dear.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my *eyesight*, I can assure you,’ said Rumpi, her voice thick with suspicion. ‘I just hope you’re keeping off those chicken frankies,’ she continued with a sigh. ‘It’s for your own good, Chubby. Remember what happened to Rajiv Uncle.’

Ah, poor old Rajiv Uncle. Last month, he’d suffered a massive heart attack while at the wheel of his Mahindra Scorpio and taken out four feet of the central barricade of the Noida Expressway. The fact that he’d been fifty-four, only a couple of years older than Puri, had not been lost on Rumpi or his three daughters. Mummy had seen fit to comment on it as well – along with his three sisters-in-law, numerous aunties, and even a cheeky nephew or two. Indeed, given the great Indian family system in which everyone knows everyone else’s business and everyone exercises the right to involve themselves and comment upon everyone else’s affairs, the detective had recently found himself on the receiving end of a good deal of health-related advice. Most irritating of all had been the impromptu lecture from his seventeen-year-old niece, whose opinions on most things in life were informed by India’s edition of *Cosmo* magazine.

Age still trumped youth even in today’s changing middle-class society, so he had been able to tell her to put a sock in it. But over his wife, he enjoyed no such advantage.

‘Yes, my dear,’ he replied with a prodigious yawn. ‘Now I had better get changed. You’re right. It is getting late. And I would be making one stop along the way.’

‘Please don’t tell me you’re working, Chubby – not today of all days.’

‘Ten minutes is required, only,’ he assured her.

Puri escaped into the bathroom to attend to his handlebar moustache, which was looking limp after the rigorous shampoo and conditioning he’d given it earlier. First, he groomed it with a special comb with fine metal teeth. Then

he applied some Wacky Tacky wax, which he heated with a hairdryer so it became soft and pliable. And finally, he shaped it into a symmetrical handlebar, curling the ends.

‘Pukka!’

He returned to the bedroom to find his wife sitting at her dresser, putting on her earrings. Her long, straight hair hung down her back over the blouse of her lustrous black and gold Benarasi sari.

Puri went and stood behind her, placed his hands on her elegant shoulders and smiled.

‘Beautiful as the first day we met. More beautiful, in fact,’ he said.

Rumpi smiled back at him in the mirror. ‘Still quite the charmer, aren’t you?’ she said.

‘Once a charmer always charming,’ cooed the detective, and bent down and kissed the top of her head.

A thick January fog had engulfed Delhi and its unstoppable suburbs overnight. And when the Puris set off for south Delhi at midday – some eight hours before the murder – mist still veiled the imposing glass and steel buildings along the Delhi-Gurgaon Expressway. Bereft of the sunshine usually gleaming off their futuristic facades, the beacons of the new India suddenly looked pale and subdued.

It was still biting cold as well. Not freezing, it had to be said, but the short winter always found the vast majority of the capital’s inhabitants woefully ill prepared. With no means to heat classrooms, the city’s schools had been closed for the past week. ‘Load shedding’ led to frequent blackouts. And the morning newspapers brought daily reports of a dozen or so deaths amongst the countless thousands living in Delhi’s makeshift *jugghis*.

The languid figures Puri spotted through the fogged-up windows of his Ambassador, layered in chunky cotton sweaters, reminded him of Victorian polar explorers in the days before brightly coloured, mass-produced puffer jackets

and fleeces. He spotted security guards standing outside the gates of a call centre huddled around an electric cooking ring, chins tucked on chests like disobedient boys sent to the naughty corner. Further on, a gang of labourers breaking rocks in a ditch wore scarves wrapped over the tops of their heads and under their chins, lending them a strangely effeminate look despite the arduous nature of their task.

Puri and Rumpi had spent yesterday afternoon volunteering at a local charity, distributing blankets to the city's poor. Many of those they'd encountered had been visibly malnourished, making them especially vulnerable to the cold. The experience had served as a sharp reminder that for all the growth in the economy, for all the fanfare about dazzling GDP figures and IT this and that, there was still so much need and want. Upon returning home last night, Puri had felt moved to write a new letter to the most honourable editor of *The Times of India*, pointing out that it was the duty of the 'proper authorities' to make improvements and the responsibility of 'ordinary citizens' to hold them accountable.

'With so much of change coming to modern society, it is of the upmost importance and necessity, also, that we continue to uphold the role of *dharma*,' he'd written. 'Dharma has been the underlying concept of our civilisation over so many of millennia. Let us not forget the meaning of the word itself. This most cherished and honoured of words comes to us from the root *dhr* meaning "to hold, to bear, to carry". For both Chanakya, founder of the Maurya Empire, and our great Emperor Ashoka, it meant "law, virtue, ethics and truth". Let us abide by these most honourable of principles, and with them firmly set in our minds, let us remember our collected responsibility to others and one another also.'

His message was evidently lost on the city's drivers. Despite the poor visibility, cars and trucks sped up behind the Ambassador flashing their headlights and honking their

horns, and wove through slower-moving traffic like getaway vehicles fleeing bank robberies. Cocky hatchbacks, their side mirrors folded inward, squeezed between other vehicles, making three lanes out of two. The occasional, rusting three-wheeler suddenly came into view, pattering along in the fast lane. And sports cars rocketed past, vanishing instantaneously into the fog. Puri kept bracing himself, anticipating a screech of brakes and the boom of a high-speed impact, but they never came. Could this lack of carnage be attributed to divine providence, he wondered? Or had Indian drivers developed the heightened reflexes of demolition derby drivers given that they faced similar conditions?

Certainly the police played no part in keeping the traffic moving safely. Puri didn't spot a single patrol car along the entire route.

There weren't any hazard signs in place, either. And so it was with a sigh of relief that he greeted the exit sign for South Delhi and the Ambassador was delivered safely down the off-ramp.

A broad carriageway carried the car past the gated communities of the super-elite, where the tops of luxury villas peeked over high walls ringed by security cameras. They passed a series of identical concrete 'overbridges', which held aloft the city's new flyovers, and soon reached the AIIMS spaghetti junction. The detective found it impossible to pass the installation art steel 'sprouts' growing from the embankment without making some disparaging comment, and today was no exception. 'If that is art then my name is Charlie with a capital C!' he said, becoming all the more vocal when Rumpi said that she quite liked them.

She and Puri were still arguing, albeit it good-naturedly, when the car turned into Laxmi Bai Nagar.

'Number four oblique B, H Block, Lane C, off Avenue B.' He read the address from a text message he'd been sent on his phone. 'Behind all-day milk stall.'

Handbrake, his driver, acknowledged these instructions with a 'Yes, Boss' and promptly pulled over to ask for directions.

'*Aaall daay milk staall kahan hai?*' he asked an autorickshaw driver.

'What is this case you're working on, Chubby?' asked Rumpi as they waited.

She rarely enquired about Puri's work (and he in turn usually only told her about an investigation once it was over). However, on this occasion, she felt she had the right to know. It was a big day for her family, after all.

'You remember Satya Pal Bhalla?' he replied.

'That tabla player?'

'No, other one - moustache fellow.'

'Oh God, don't tell me,' she moaned.

Puri gave a knowing nod. 'Absolutely, my dear. A total weirdo, we can say. But he called this morning, only, in quite a panic. Seems he got looted.'

This was an oversimplification. But the detective had no intention of providing Rumpi with the details. The whole thing would sound ridiculous and she would insist on driving directly to their destination, the Kotla cricket stadium, where her nephew, Rohan, was due to play in one of the opening matches of the new, multibillion-dollar cricket tournament, the ICT.

To the detective, however, the case was as tantalising as a *jalebi* to a fly. He'd had to handle a lot of run-of-the-mill work in the past month or so - a slew of bog-standard matrimonial investigations, a mundane credit card fraud, several death verifications for insurance companies.

Worst of all, he'd found himself helping that bloody Queenie Mehta of Golf Links prove that her upstairs tenant was eating non-vegetarian food when the lease strictly forbade the consumption of meat on the premises. It didn't help matters that from the start Puri had sympathised with the 'offender'; nor that the investigation itself had been

especially unchallenging. True, the tenant in question had been careful not to place any incriminating evidence in his garbage, disposing of the bones from his illicit meals outside his home. But after one of Most Private Investigators' operatives had followed him to the butcher's and covertly videoed him buying a kilo of mutton, the case had been brought to a speedy conclusion.

Was it any wonder that the attempt to cut off Satya Pal Bhalla's moustache, the longest in the world, had every cell in his detective brain tingling with anticipation?

Who would have done such a thing? A rival for his title? Someone with a grudge? Anything was possible in Delhi these days, Puri reminded himself. With the city's population growing exponentially, corruption endemic, and the elite amassing fabulous wealth as well as adopting Western tastes and lifestyles, Indian crime was taking on ever-new facets.

Just look at the story on the front page of today's paper. Six months ago, if the report was to be believed, an Indian hacker had accessed America's Pentagon computer system and downloaded dozens of top-secret files related to security in South Asia.

A commentator in the same paper likened these times to the myth of Neelkanth, when the demons churned the ocean in search of *Amrita*, the nectar of immortality. What they created instead was poison, which had to be consumed by the god Shiva.

From this legend came the Hindi saying: '*Amrut pane se pehle Vish pinna padta hai.*' Roughly translated it means, 'You can't have the sweet without the sour.'

Three wrong turns, a couple of U-turns and two more stops-to-ask-directions later, Handbrake pulled up outside the address. Puri's prospective client, Bhalla, lived in a three-storey government-housing complex for *babus* and their families. There were dozens of such blocks in south Delhi,



most of them built in the 1950s and '60s. Architecturally uninspiring, painted in the same government-issue off-pink, and only distinguishable from one another by the letters and numbers stencilled on their facades, they had become some of the most desirable addresses in the capital. H Block was set amongst neem trees and small communal gardens known as 'parks', where children played in the sunshine that was now breaking through the fog.

Puri made his way up the bare concrete staircase to the second floor. The sound of hissing pressure cookers came from inside one of the other apartments. A smell of roasting cumin and fried mustard oil filled the air.

Outside the door to 4/B, he found several pairs of shoes lying in a jumble. He unlaced his and placed them to one side. The bell brought an elderly servant woman bearing a pair of rubber chappals.

The detective was standing on the landing trying to get his stockinged toes between the toe rings when Raju Pillai stepped out of the apartment.

'Thank the God you've come, Mr Puri,' he said. 'I'm at my wits' end!'

As was fitting for the Director General and Honorary Secretary of the Moustache Organisation of Punjab (MOP), Pillai sported a thick, black walrus with bushy muttonchops. He pulled the door shut behind him.

'Satya-ji's in such a state, I tell you,' he said, keeping his voice down and giving a quick glance backwards as if someone might overhear. 'Thought I'd come over to see what I could do for him.'

'Very good of you,' intoned Puri.

'I thought it better we have a private conference before you get the facts from the horse's mouth.'

'Must have been quite a shock, losing half his moustache and all,' said the detective, who was still struggling with the chappals.

'Can you imagine, Mr Puri? Thirty years plus he's been nurturing and grooming it. Cared for every last whisker. That level of dedication and commitment is seen only rarely these days. And then *phoof!* Half of it vanished into thin air! From right under his nose, no less. I tell you, Mr Puri, India has lost one of its greatest treasures. The Taj Mahal of moustaches! Something of which *all* Indians could feel proud.'

'On phone, Satya-ji said it was removed in the wee hours,' said Puri. 'He was sleeping or what?'

'Seems so, Mr Puri. Must have been drugged somehow.'

'He said also one security guard got hold of the thief but he escaped.'

'Exactly. The guard spotted a gentleman climbing up the side of the balcony in dead of night. Thus he alerted the police, but they failed to arrive. So he took it upon himself to investigate. Quite a fearless fellow, it seems. He caught the intruder in the act and gave chase. Seems a struggle took place. Thus the removed portion of the moustache was recovered.'

Puri finally managed to get the chappals on, more or less, his heels protruding over the backs.

'He is present - this security guard?' he asked.

'The police inspector, one Surinder Thakur, got hold of him for questioning.'

'He was able to make positive ID - the security guard, that is?'

'Not that I'm aware.'

The detective took out his notebook and wrote down Thakur's name before asking: 'The removed section of the moustache is where exactly?'

'Thakur has taken it for evidence. Against all our protestations, I should say.'

'He offered any theory to what all happened?'

'Frankly speaking, Mr Puri, I don't believe he's taking the case seriously. Seemed to find the whole thing amusing for

some reason!’

‘Our Dilli police are not performing their duties in a professional manner,’ said the detective with a solemn shake of the head. ‘You’ve any theory yourself as to the identity of the guilty person? Could be a rival moustache grower, no?’

‘Not a member of MOP, that is for sure!’ said Pillai, bristling. ‘Our members are *all* respectable gentlemen. From well-to-do families, I should add. You yourself are a member, Mr Puri.’

‘Yes, but surely—’ ventured the detective.

‘Each and every member is aware of the supreme effort and sacrifice required to grow an award-winning moustache,’ continued Pillai. ‘Never have I seen one hint of jealousy aimed at Satya-ji. Everyone is proud of his accomplishment. You recall the reception after he returned from US last year? One and all gave him a hero’s welcome.’

Puri gave a knowing nod, loath to admit that he hadn’t attended the special dinner that had been held to honour Satya Pal Bhalla. The truth was he attended few MOP functions if he could help it. He’d become a member to do his bit for promoting the growth of moustaches amongst Indian youths (it was, after all, sad and shocking to see how many young Punjabi men were not ‘sporting’ these days), and to indulge in a bit of socialising and networking with like-minded individuals. But over the years the organisation had been hijacked by a competitive group of individuals. All they talked about was, well, moustaches. And Rumpi, for once, refused to attend any more of their functions.

‘I can’t listen to the debate about wax versus gel ever again,’ she’d protested after the 2007 annual dinner, her last.

Satya Pal Bhalla was the worst offender. A Grade II bureaucrat employed in the Central Secretariat Stenographers’ Service, he was one of a breed of Indians who were desperate to stand out from a crowd 1.2 billion

strong and therefore dedicated their lives to extreme pursuits. The ultimate prize for such types was an entry in the best-selling *Limca Book of Records*.

Growing his thirteen-foot-long leviathan had brought Bhalla fame and kudos. Indeed, no one stepping into his living room could fail to be impressed by the collection of photographs on the walls, of Ballah posing with the great and the good.

While Pillai went to fetch the victim from his bedroom, Puri circled the room admiring the photos. Mother Teresa; ace batsman Sachin Tendulkar; the father of India's nuclear bomb, Dr Abdul Kalam; Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan . . . Bhalla had met them all.

His moustache had also brought him promotional work. By the window hung some framed print advertisements in which he had appeared. One for SHIFT clothes detergent depicted him standing with his moustache stretched out in both directions. Brightly coloured shirts and underwear hung from it. A DEEP CLEAN YOU'LL WANT TO SHOW OFF, read the slogan.

But now it seemed Bhalla's career was over and the man himself looked bereft. His moustache's left tendril had been completely shorn off, leaving the right section still curled around his cheek like a Danish pastry.

'Heartfelt condolences, sir,' said Puri as he entered the room. 'What you must be feeling I cannot imagine.'

'Is no one safe in their own house?' asked Bhalla, as if the detective was somehow responsible for the break-in. 'Look at me! Look at what is left! I'm a freak!' He tugged at the bare section of his upper lip, his eyes burning with anger. 'I want him caught, Puri! Do you hear? I want him to pay! We all know who did this and I want you to get him! Whatever it takes!'

The detective raised a calming hand. 'Who is it you believe was the culprit exactly, sir?' he asked.

‘Ragi of course!’ Bhalla’s anger flared. ‘He’s been after my number one status for years! Finally he’s found a way to get me out of the way!’

It was true that Gopal Ragi was now, by default, the Moustache Raja of India. It was also true that he and Bhalla hated one another.

‘Recently that bastard accused me of wearing hair extensions!’ he continued. ‘I told him, “Go to hell!” And he threatened me! You know what he said? That if he was *me*, he would watch his back! *And* his moustache, also! His exact words!’

‘There were witnesses, sir – to his threat?’

‘So many!’

‘You can provide names, is it?’

‘Everyone knows he threatened me, Puri! Ask anyone.’

Pillai now spoke up, reiterating in an equitable manner that he could not bring himself to believe that a fellow MOP member could be responsible for such a horrific act. But he was shouted down.

‘What does he know?’ bawled Bhalla with a smirk. ‘Nothing! I’m telling you. It was that bastard for sure.’

‘The truth will come out in the wash,’ said Puri. ‘But first I must know what all happened here.’

‘All I can tell you is this,’ said Bhalla in an irritated monotone. ‘After eating my *khana* last night, I felt ill and went to bed early. This morning I woke later than usual. Must have been nine. The maid was waiting by my bed. She was the one who broke the news and informed me the police were waiting. I went directly into the bathroom and looked in the mirror and . . . and well, you have seen this . . . this *massacre*. What that bloody bastard has done to me!’

‘You said you felt ill, is it? What is it you ate exactly?’

‘*Channa bhatura*.’

‘You like it *mirchi* is it, sir?’

‘Hotter the better.’

‘Who else shares the house?’

'Myself and the maid.'

'No family?'

Bhalla raised his hands and dropped them on to the arms of his chair, clearly frustrated at the line of questioning. 'What has that got to do with anything?' he demanded. Puri's placid, enquiring gaze elicited an answer.

'My wife's no more. A boy comes during the day to clean and do shopping and so forth. He's a new one. Useless.'

'He's present, also?'

'Didn't come today. Inspector Thakur's visiting his home. It's far - two hours at least.'

'He comes every day back and forth is it?'

'Look, I don't give two damns about his travel arrangements. What I care about is Ragi's whereabouts last night.'

'I understand your frustration, sir,' responded Puri. 'Nonetheless facts are required. So tell me: this channa batura . . . the maid prepared it, is it?'

'Yes,' was the laconic reply.

'Any is left over?'

'It got finished off.'

'What time you ate exactly?'

'Eight-thirty.'

'You always eat at this hour, sir?'

'Always.'

'She ate also - the maid that is?'

'Must be.'

Next, the detective examined what was left of the moustache, scrutinising the shorn section of the upper lip. The hairs were cropped close to the skin. It was a meticulous job.

'Expertly done, one can say. Any implements were left behind - scissors and so forth?'

'Nothing was found.'

A honk of the Ambassador's horn reminded him that Rumpi was waiting. He checked his watch. Fifteen minutes

had passed. He would have to make his search of the crime scene a quick one and return later if necessary.

He made his way to the bedroom, the chappals cutting into the middle portion of the bottom of his feet so that he was forced to tiptoe. On the bed sheet, the detective found a few shavings, indicating that the work had indeed been carried out while Bhalla lay asleep. There was also some shaving foam residue on the side table, as well as a watermark in the shape of a razor.

But why not cut off both parts with scissors and be done? Puri wondered. Surely the spiteful thing to do would have been to cut both ends off and leave them lying on the floor – a matter of a couple of minutes' work.

'Why so thorough a job?' he said out loud.

'What was that you said?' Pillai, who was lingering in the doorway, asked.

But the detective ignored the question.

'Tell me one thing,' he said. 'The security guard saw this moustache thief climb inside over the balcony, is it?'

'Came banging on the door from what I understand,' answered Pillai.

'Thus our visitor got panicked and ran away. He went over the balcony again?'

'I believe so. That was when the security guard fellow gave chase.'

Puri headed into the kitchen. The maid, an elderly servant woman, was standing at the counter making *paneer*. She looked scared, but the detective read nothing into this. Servants were often shoddily treated and always fell under suspicion as soon as anything went wrong in a household. Was it any wonder they feared authority?

He began by asking her if it was true she'd eaten any of the same food.

'Yes, sahib,' she answered timidly in Hindi.

'You felt drowsy?'

'Yes, sahib.'

'How much did you eat?'

'A small portion.'

'Where did you sleep last night?'

'The same place I always do. Here on the kitchen floor.'

'On a bedroll?'

'A sheet of newspaper.'

Puri managed to disguise his disgust at the manner in which this woman was forced to live.

'Did anyone else enter the kitchen in the past twenty-four hours?' he asked.

'One man came yesterday. To check the gas canister registration.' She added hurriedly: 'He showed me his identification. He was from the MCD.'

'He was alone in the kitchen?'

'The phone rang after he came. I went to answer it. So I—'

'Who was calling?' interrupted Puri.

'A sales wallah. From the phone company.'

'The channa was sitting on the stove?'

'Yes, sahib.'

'Would you recognise this gas canister wallah?'

She looked down at the floor. 'My eyesight is not good, sahib.'

Puri asked her whether she'd been woken in the middle of the night by the security guard banging on the door and she confirmed that this was indeed what had happened. He thanked her and made his way to the apartment's back door. It led on to a small balcony. There were scuff marks on the top of the wall and down the side of the building.

He returned to the living room. The Ambassador's horn sounded again.

'Vish Puri will take the case,' announced the detective with a bow that was intended to convey humbleness. 'Seems we are dealing with a cunning individual. He entered the premises yesterday afternoon only. Then and there, he added some knockout drug to your channa. So much chilli was present that you did not notice the taste.'



His fee, Puri went on to explain, would be 4,000 rupees per day, plus expenses.

‘So much?’ exclaimed Bhalla, wide-eyed.

‘One week I’ll require in advance. Cash, banker’s draft or electronic transfer, only.’

‘Show me results first, Puri, then only I’ll make payment,’ insisted Bhalla.

The detective gave a truculent shake of his head. ‘Rest assured, sir, Vish Puri never fails. In my long and distinguished career, no mystery till date has gone unresolved or unsolved.’

‘Two thousand per day, three days maximum,’ suggested Bhalla.

‘Price is final, no negotiation.’

Puri tiptoed towards the door. As he reached for the handle, Bhalla relented. ‘Just get me Gopal Ragi!’ he said. ‘All right you win.’

‘First class,’ replied the detective. ‘I would be sending my man later to pick up payment.’

He returned to the Ambassador to find Rumpi fuming.

‘You’ve been twenty minutes, Chubby!’

‘Hearties apologies, my dear,’ answered Puri. ‘The case is more complicated than I imagined. A most *hairy* set of circumstances we can say.’

## TWO

THE ROAR OF fifty thousand fans greeted the Puris as they found their seats in the VIP section reserved for the 'near or dear' of ICT players. Delhi Cowboys captain Gopal Shastri had just hit a six, smacking the ball deep into the west stand, and the home crowd had gone wild. Throughout the hallowed Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium, built on the site of the capital of the fourteenth-century Delhi Sultanate, air horns blasted over the sharp beat of *dhol* drums, and the team's Hindi-English anthem was bellowed out: '*Khel Front Foot Pe!*'

Even Rumpi's father, Brigadier Mattu, who'd dressed in a tie and blazer for the occasion (he was also wearing a brown monkey cap that framed the centre of his face and lent him the look of a gentleman bank robber), was up on his feet waving the team's colours.

'Seems we're off to a first-rate start, sir,' said the detective as he sat down in the seat next to his father-in-law.

'Three fours off the first over alone, Puri!' replied Mattu. 'Good to see our boys on the offensive.'

The Brigadier - slight and grey-haired with an inquisitive face - slowly re-took his seat. Then, with a sharp pencil and meticulous hand, he updated his scorecard. It was resting on a thick sudoku volume; a bookmark indicated that he'd completed at least half of the brain-teasers. 'Most probably did them over his cornflakes,' the detective thought to himself. Mattu had a registered IQ of 137 and was a former code breaker, after all. He spoke seven languages fluently, including Mandarin and Tani, which he'd learned while

stationed near the Chinese border in the contested Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. He was a topper at bridge, the Gymkhana Club champion no less. And he was a walking encyclopaedia of cricket.

‘Our team’s weakness is with the bowling,’ he told Puri. ‘We’re unlikely to see much swing in the ball today. Let’s just hope Maharooof’s in good form. He’s certainly got a supportive crowd behind him.’

The stadium was indeed heaving – every seat was occupied, some by more than one fan. Children sat bunched atop walls and concrete overhangs, legs dangling through railings. All the aisles and steps were jammed with eager faces.

When the Cowboys’ captain hit another six, the whole place erupted in cheers and Bollywood songs – a feverish carnival of flags and banners and impromptu dancing. STUNNER! flashed across the stadium’s giant screens, quickly followed by advertisements for mobile phone networks, fast food chains and popular skin-whitening creams – all this to the bone-shaking decibel level of Queen: ‘WE WILL, WE WILL ROCK YOU!’

‘Very good, young man!’ called out Rumpi’s mother, who was sitting to the right of the Brigadier, patting her hands together in delight. ‘Very good!’

Down on the boundary, they could see India’s latest cultural import from the West, American cheerleaders in little pleated skirts and tight halter tops, performing acrobatics with their sparkly pompoms and favouring the crowd with flashes of their cleavage and knickers.

‘Give us a D . . . E . . . L . . . H . . . I! GO COWBOYS!’

The reaction from the almost exclusively male – and by the looks of it totally *tulli* – fans down in the bleachers was no less frenzied than it had been for Shastri’s s-tunning shot. Like lewd punters at a strip club, they ogled the *goris’* ample proportions and howled and wolf-whistled.

Thank the God Rumpi's mother, who was hard of hearing, couldn't make out the Punjabi obscenities being shouted, Puri thought.

'Do you know, *beta*, I used to be able to do that?' the detective overheard her telling Rumpi as the girls performed a series of cartwheels. 'I was junior gymnastics champion. But I didn't wear uniforms like those. Must be very practical I suppose.'

Practical was not a word Puri had come across in the reams of newsprint that had been dedicated to the cheerleader controversy in the Indian press over the past few days. 'Vulgar', 'obscene' and, perhaps most damning of all, 'un-Indian' had been the reaction from not only the religious right, but the liberal, self-appointed guardians of India's secular democracy as well.

'All the organisers are doing by making scantily clad white women dance in front of huge crowds is to stoke the base, voyeuristic and sexual insecurities of the Indian male,' historian and cricket aficionado Ramachandra Guha had been quoted as saying in the *Hindustan Times*.

Puri could not have agreed more. 'Why we are taking worst characteristics of Western world, I ask you?' he had written to the honourable editor of *The Times of India* last week. 'This is most certainly *not* cricket.'

But as Puri well knew, the presence of the cheerleaders, who were on loan from major American football teams like the Washington Redskins, was in keeping with the new, highly commercial face of cricket. India had, in the words of one commentator, 'masala-ed' the sport of its former colonial masters. Pristine whites and tepid bitter and understated British 'I say!' applause had been subverted by garish uniforms blazing with advertising and raucous bhangra dancing.

The sport's new Twenty-Twenty format was electrifying - fast paced and, at three hours long, tailor-made for TV. In India alone, the audience numbered in the tens of millions.

Bollywood stars and billionaire tycoons ranked amongst the owners. And along with the deities of Indian cricket, the cream of Australia, South Africa and the West Indies had signed up.

Perhaps most extraordinary of all, however, was the participation of eleven Pakistani players. The Kolkata Colts had bought Kamran Khan, the twenty-three-year-old fast-paced bowler, for the duration of the annual month-long tournament.

It was Khan who now claimed the Delhi captain's wicket.

Approaching from the Willingdon Pavilion end, he delivered a devastating yorker, clean bowling Shastri's off stump and sending the bails flying. 'SHAME!' flashed up on the screens as the crowd emitted a harsh sigh of disappointment. The American cheerleaders, for whom cricket was clearly a total mystery, launched into another series of cancan high kicks and the loss of Delhi's star batsman was soon forgotten amidst the male fans' leering and caterwauling.

'Twenty-two off fourteen balls,' said the Brigadier as he updated his scorecard. 'I believe our boy is up next.'

Soon, cheers greeted Rumpi's nephew Rohan as he stepped out on to the field, bat in hand. The entire Mattu clan rose to their feet, beaming with pride. Rohan was being touted as one of the country's new hopefuls. At just eighteen, he'd captained the Indian Juniors and, last month, been called up to the national squad for a friendly against New Zealand. Batting at number ten, he'd scored an impressive thirty-three not out.

'Just look at him out there - so handsome and confident,' said Rumpi, eyes brimming with tears. 'I feel so proud.'

Puri felt caught up in the moment as well. 'Little blighter's come a long way from knocking balls through my window,' he said with a smile.

Rohan gave the pitch a thorough inspection, positioned himself in front of his stumps and, having made a

considered survey of the field, readied himself for the first delivery.

Kamrah Khan shone one side of the ball on the crotch of his trousers as he sized up the Delhi boy. His delivery began as a mere trot, a series of short, light steps. Then his long legs began to eat up the distance like a panther. His arms wound round in a fluid, graceful movement, and as he planted his right foot millimetres short of the crease, his six-foot frame arched back like a giant bow. The ball left his hand at a staggering 84 miles an hour, bounced short and shot upwards at a 45 degree angle.

Rohan anticipated its trajectory and ducked as the ball whistled past his helmet. BOUNCER! appeared on the giant screens and a collective Boo carried through the stadium.

'Isn't that illegal?' asked Rumpi, who knew little more about cricket than the cheerleaders.

'No, no, perfectly legal,' answered her father. 'Invented by the British to thwart their old foes the Australians. Khan's just trying to put the frighteners on him.'

'But it's dangerous!' exclaimed Rumpi. 'Rohan could get hurt!'

The Brigadier chuckled. 'Not to worry. He can take care of himself.'

Puri felt his heart racing as the Pakistani bowler made his second approach. This delivery was even faster, 89 miles per hour, and the length was perfect. Rohan misjudged the bounce. The ball deflected off the edge of his bat and was caught at gully.

'Howzat!' screamed the delirious Kolkata players.

The umpire's arm shot up, signalling a no ball. Khan had overstepped the crease. A sigh of relief passed through the stands.

'That's Khan's second no ball today,' commented Brigadier Mattu as he updated his scorecard. 'And he's bowled one wide as well. Not his best form.'