



Vish Puri

A

Mystery

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

Alexander McCall Smith

The Case of the
Love
Commandos

Tarquin Hall

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Mouthwatering Dishes from the Vish Puri Family Kitchen
Glossary
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About the Book

When India's Love Commandos rescue a young woman - who has been forbidden from marrying an untouchable - from a high-caste family, she looks set to live happily ever after with the man she truly loves. But just hours before the wedding, her boyfriend, Ram, is abducted. Has his would-be father-in-law made good on his promise and done away with him?

It falls to Vish Puri to find out. Unfortunately, he's not having a good month. He can't locate a haul of stolen jewellery. He's been pickpocketed. And the only person who can get his wallet back is his interfering Mummy-ji.

Things only get worse when he discovers that his arch-rival, Hari Kumar, is also trying to locate the abducted boy - as is a genetics research institute exploiting illiterate villagers.

To find Ram first, Puri and his team must travel into the badlands of rural India where the local politics are shaped by millennia-old caste prejudices.

About the Author

Tarquin Hall, a British writer and journalist, has spent almost a decade living in South Asia. He is the author of the Vish Puri mystery series in addition to dozens of articles and three works of nonfiction, including the highly acclaimed *Salaam Brick Lane*. He and his wife, Indian-born journalist Anu Anand, live in Delhi with their two young children. Tarquin can be reached through his website and blog www.tarquinhall.com. Puri sahib also maintains his own site www.vishpuri.com and is active on Twitter [@vishpuridelhi](https://twitter.com/vishpuridelhi).

Also by Tarquin Hall

Fiction

The Case of the Missing Servant
The Case of the Man Who Died Laughing
The Case of the Deadly Butter Chicken

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
Love Commandos*

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

TARQUIN HALL



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For Ta

Prologue

The Love Commando watched the black Range Rover pull in through the gates of the University of Agra. Laxmi—the Commando’s code name—could make out the portly profile of the driver, the one who was so fond of chicken tikka, desi sharab and the accommodating ladies of the local bazaar.

Next to him sat the goon with the gorilla nose and droopy eyes. He looked like he’d have had trouble spelling his own name. But it would be a mistake to underestimate him, Laxmi noted. Naga, as he was known at his local gym, was a power-lifting champion with fists the size of sledgehammers.

“They’re pulling up now,” she said into her mobile phone, the line open to her fellow Love Commando volunteer Shruti, who was waiting inside the gymnasium building where the examinations were about to begin.

It was ten minutes to four.

The driver had kept his end of the bargain. Now Laxmi would have to live up to hers. Last night’s surveillance video of his dalliance with that bar girl would not find its way into the hands of his wife after all.

From behind the Licensed Refrigerated Water “Trolley” positioned across the road, she watched the driver alight. He looked up and down the busy street. Satisfied that the coast was clear, he opened the Range Rover’s back door.

The revulsion Laxmi felt for the driver paled in comparison to the contempt in which she held his boss, who emerged. Vishnu Mishra personified everything the

Love Commandos were attempting to change about India. In north Indian parlance, he was known as a Thakur, literally “lord”—a hereditary landowner with no qualms about exploiting the caste system that still doomed tens of millions of low-caste Indians to subjugation and poverty. His immaculate appearance despite Agra city’s heat and dust owed everything to this gross imbalance. An army of servants attended to his every whim: cooks, cleaners, sweepers, even a personal barber-cum-shampoo wallah who kept his nails immaculate, buffed his skin and, rumor had it, dressed him in the morning. Managers oversaw the day-to-day running of his numerous commercial activities. His eldest son managed his political ambitions. And a mistress called “Smoothy” ensured that during many an afternoon in apartment 301D of Avalon Apartments, his carnal needs were sated.

Mishra even had a ready vote bank of thirty thousand subjugated tenant farmers whom he maintained in a perpetual state of poverty and hunger.

Still, there was one task he was evidently prepared to take care of himself: Vishnu Mishra was prepared to kill.

As he climbed down from his Range Rover, Laxmi caught a flash of the semiautomatic inside his jacket.

He stood for a few seconds, surveying the street and waiting for Naga to alight from the other side of the vehicle. Then he beckoned for his daughter to step out.

This was the first time Laxmi had laid eyes on Tulsi. She’d been under lock and key for the past three months in the family’s Agra villa, barred from having contact with even her closest female friends. Indeed, the only visitors she’d seen in all that time were prospective grooms and their families, all of them vetted and introduced by an “upscale” marriage broker.

“Beautiful, homely, fair and proper height” was how Cupids Matrimonial Agency had described her. Laxmi could see that this was no exaggeration. Tulsi had mother-of-

pearl skin and dark brown eyes set amidst a flurry of long black lashes. She looked to be in good health, with plenty of color in her cheeks. If she bore her father any ill will, it certainly didn't show in her dotting smile.

Had she buckled under the relentless pressure of parents and family? Laxmi wondered.

She'd known it to happen before. Tulsi's boyfriend, Ram, might have been a handsome boy with liquid brown eyes, but he was still an "untouchable," or Dalit—a caste so low and noxious to the highborn Hindu that, until recent times, the slightest physical contact with a member had been considered personally polluting.

Vishnu Mishra would stop at nothing to prevent his daughter from seeing Ram again. He'd blocked all communication between them and left the young man in no doubt about what would happen if he attempted to contact Tulsi again.

"I'll kill you at the earliest opportunity, Dalit dog," he'd promised over the phone.

But Ram hadn't been scared off. He'd appealed to the Love Commandos for help. The charity helped Indian couples from disparate castes and religions to marry and settle down, often under aliases. The founders and volunteers believed that the arranged-marriage system was holding back society and that if young people were able to choose their own partners—to marry across caste lines and therefore break down the ordained divisions once and for all—then India would become a more progressive place.

Laxmi, who'd met with Ram a fortnight ago, had taken a shine to the young Dalit and his commitment to Tulsi.

"She has hair that smells like raat ki raani," he'd told her. Did Ram understand how hard it was for "love marriage" couples to make their way in Indian society without parental support? Did he comprehend how especially hard it would be for them given that Tulsi was from a Thakur family and he a Dalit one? Possibly not. "Without blossoms

there is no spring in life,” he said, quoting from the poet Ghalib. Ram sounded naïve, but Laxmi was willing to risk her life for the lanky love-struck student nonetheless.

And what better place for the Love Commandos to strike again but Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, the world’s greatest monument to love?

Now the whole plan hung on whether Tulsi would be true to her feelings—and whether she was brave enough.

If she wanted to avoid an arranged marriage at the Harmony Farms wedding venue a week from today, then she would have to be. This was her only chance of escape, her finals being the one commitment Vishnu Mishra would ensure that she didn’t miss.

“She’s heading in now,” Laxmi reported to Shruti. “Be ready.”

Vishnu Mishra led Tulsi inside the examination hall past clutches of students. Naga followed a few steps behind. His steroid-enhanced muscles ensured that he moved like a gunslinger in an American Western, with legs splayed and arms hanging stiffly by his sides.

The driver, meanwhile, stepped over to the Licensed Refrigerated Water Trolley and demanded a glass of nimboo pani. He gulped it down, some of the liquid trickling onto his stubbly chin, and eyed Laxmi, who was posing as the vendor.

“Want to be Radha to my Krishna, baby?” he said with a lecherous grin.

She ignored him and he tossed a couple of coins onto the top of the cart before returning to the Range Rover.

A few seconds later, her phone vibrated with an SMS. “Dad’s here!” it read.

Laxmi cursed under her breath. Vishnu Mishra had gone *inside* the examination hall. He must have come to an arrangement with the adjudicator—no doubt a financial one.

“Stick to plan,” she messaged back before donning her helmet, jumping on her scooter and kick-starting the engine.

Crossing over the road and mounting the pavement, she headed down the alleyway that ran alongside the gymnasium building. It was littered with chunks of loose concrete and dog turds. She pulled up beneath the window to the ladies’ toilets.

A few minutes later, she received another SMS confirming that Tulsi had been slipped Ram’s note asking her to run away with him.

All Laxmi could do now was wait—and pray.

Forty-five minutes passed. Laxmi was beginning to give up hope when a set of painted fingernails appeared over the window ledge.

A pair of anxious dark brown eyes followed. It was Tulsi.

“Are you with Ram?” she whispered.

“Yes, I’ll take you to him!” answered Laxmi.

The Love Commandos had placed a bamboo ladder in the alley earlier that morning. She picked it up and leaned it against the wall.

“I’m not sure I can do it!” said Tulsi as she looked down.

“We’ve only got a few minutes before you’re missed. Hurry!”

It took the young woman a couple of attempts to get one elbow up onto the windowsill. The other followed. Then a foot.

“That’s it, you’re almost there!”

Just then, there was a thud inside the toilets—a door slamming against the wall. A man’s voice shouted, “What the hell? Get down!”

He grabbed Tulsi by the leg and tried to pull her back inside, but she kicked. “No, Papa! Stop! Let me go!”

Laxmi heard another thud—Vishnu Mishra falling backwards into a toilet cubicle—and suddenly Tulsi was

free and scrambling out the window.

Within seconds, she'd reached the bottom and Laxmi sent the ladder clattering to the ground. Mishra's curses rained down on the two women as they clambered onto the scootie and sped away down the alley, slaloming through the debris.

They reached the front of the gymnasium to find the pavement occupied by a crowd of students demonstrating against poverty, chanting and holding up placards that read: IF I GIVE CHARITY YOU CALL ME A SAINT, IF I TALK ABOUT POVERTY YOU CALL ME A COMMUNIST!

Honking her horn and motioning the students out of the way, Laxmi wove between them.

Out of the corner of one eye, she spotted Naga bursting out of the gymnasium doors. He pushed through the crowd and knocked over three or four students. "Stop!"

He would have caught her had it not been for Laxmi's colleague Sanjoy, a third Love Commando volunteer, who'd been mingling with the students.

Stepping forward, a can of pepper spray at the ready, he nailed the goon right in the face.

Naga reared up, roaring like a wounded animal, clasping his hands to his face, and staggered away. Sanjoy then climbed onto the back of the scootie and he, Tulsi and Laxmi sped off toward the main gate.

Behind them Vishnu Mishra ran into the middle of the street. He was wielding his revolver and gesticulating wildly to his driver to start the engine. But the man was fast asleep at the wheel of the Range Rover. The knockout pill Laxmi had slipped into his nimboo pani had done the trick.

The trio passed beneath the red sandstone ramparts of Agra Fort and crossed the sluggish, polluted waters of the Yamuna River. Between the iron supports of the bridge, they glimpsed the gleaming white marble of the Taj Mahal

before plunging headfirst into a maze of filthy alleys and lanes as cramped and teeming as an ant colony. The shop fronts of ironmongers, jewelers, dried-fruit sellers and cigarette-paan vendors interspersed with light industry units housing ironworks, printers and cardboard recyclers all appeared in rapid succession like the frames of a cartoon viewed through a Victorian zoetrope. Motorbikes and three-wheelers bullied their way through a multitude of pedestrians, cows and goats. Children spun metal bicycle wheels along the ground with sticks. At a water pump, men wearing chuddies lathered themselves in suds.

Tulsi bore the stench of raw sewage and diesel fumes and potholes without complaint. Only after they'd emerged into a landscape of houses dotted amongst virgin paddy fields on the edge of the city did she call out, "Where are we going? Where's Ram?"

The answer was a nondescript building of red brick that served as the Love Commandos safe house.

"I can't believe we got away!" gushed Tulsi as she dismounted from the scootie, shaking with fear and excitement. "Oh my God, I don't know how to thank you!"

Laxmi didn't respond. Her attention was focused on the front door of the building. It was hanging, broken, from its hinges.

"Is Ram inside? Can I see him?" asked Tulsi.

"Keep her here," Laxmi instructed Sanjoy as she stepped forward to investigate.

Pushing the door aside, she discovered a flower pot lying shattered in the corridor beyond. In the room where Ram had been staying, there were signs of a struggle. His new pair of black shoes, purchased for his impending wedding, had been thrown at the assailants who'd broken in. There were a few spots of blood on the concrete floor as well.

Laxmi searched the rest of the house, fearful of finding a body, but it was empty.

Somehow—God only knew how—Vishnu Mishra’s people had finally tracked Ram down. They’d waited until he was alone and then grabbed him. That, surely, was the only explanation.

Laxmi went outside to break the bad news to Tulsi.

Her face fell and turned pale. “Pa will kill him!” she cried. “Oh my God! I’ve got to talk to him!”

Laxmi handed the young woman her phone.

Tulsi’s hands shook, but she managed to dial the number. “Please pick up, Pa. Please, please, please,” she kept saying.

Laxmi put her head close to the phone so she could eavesdrop on the conversation.

The call was answered by a gruff male voice. “Who is this?”

Tulsi’s answer caught in her throat. “Paaaa ... I’m ... soooo ... saaarreee,” she wept.

“Where are you, beta?”

“Please don’t hurt him, Pa. I’m begging you.”

“Hurt who?”

Tulsi let out a couple of long, hard sobs. “Raaaaam!” she wailed. “I love him sooo much!”

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now I’m going to come and get you. Tell me where you are. I’m not angry. Your mother and I want you home—that is all.”

Tulsi wiped her wet cheeks and managed to compose herself. “Let me speak with Ram first,” she said. “I want to know he’s all right. Let him go and I’ll come home. Papa, I’ll never forgive you if anything happens to him.”

“Listen to me very carefully, beta. I don’t know where he is. And I don’t care. My only concern is your future. Tell me your exact location immediately.”

“You’re lying, Pa. He’s not here.”

“Where is *here*? Tell me! I’m your father!”

Laxmi grabbed the phone and disconnected the call.

She and Tulsi stared at each other, confusion and disbelief writ across their faces.

“What did he say?” asked Sanjoy, who looked equally baffled.

“He says he doesn’t have Ram,” said Laxmi.

“You believe him?”

“He sounded genuine,” said Tulsi.

One of the neighbors, whose house stood a couple of hundred yards away, pedaled past on his bicycle. Had he seen anything? Laxmi asked.

“A black SUV with tinted windows was parked here earlier.”

“Did you see who was inside?”

“Two men got out.”

“What did they look like?”

“I was too far away.”

“Did you see anyone leave with them?”

“A young man, I think. They dragged him out of the house.”

Laxmi thanked the neighbor and hurried back into the safe house to grab her bag. She emerged again to find Tulsi in a flood of tears.

“I should just go home. That way no one will get hurt,” she said, gripped by grief.

“I don’t think that’s the answer,” said Laxmi as she tried to comfort her. “Now, listen: I promise we’ll get to the bottom of this. For all we know Ram was taken by someone hoping to get a reward from your father. I’ve a friend who can help—a private detective. In the meantime I need to get you somewhere safe. You’re going to have to trust me. Will you do that?”

Tulsi thought for a moment and then gave a nod. They remounted the scooter.

“We should split up,” Laxmi told Sanjoy. “Rendezvous at the bus station in three hours. Make sure you’re not followed—and change your mobile chip.”

She disposed of her own down a drain and then headed back through Agra's burgeoning suburbs.

Once Tulsi was out of harm's reach, she'd call Vish Puri using another number.

The fact that he was supposed to be going on a pilgrimage with the rest of his family wouldn't prove an issue. The man hated taking time off.

Still, it was going to prove awkward having to explain what she, Laxmi—or rather, Facecream, the sobriquet Puri always used for her—had been doing in Agra when she was supposed to be enjoying her offs sunning in Goa.

One

It had been a quiet month—as quiet as it ever got in a nation of 1.2 billion people.

The start of June had brought a desperate call from the Khannas. The couple had arrived to take possession of their new apartment in Ecotech Park Phase 7, greater NOIDA, on a day deemed auspicious by their astrologer, only to find another family simultaneously trying to move in. Vish Puri's task had been to track down the double-crossing real estate broker, whom he'd located in the bowels of northeast Delhi.

Next, celebrity chef Inder Kapoor had commissioned Most Private Investigators Ltd. to find out who hacked his computer and stole his mother's famous recipe for chilli mint marinade. Puri's reward for identifying the culprit had been several helpings of homemade papri chaat drizzled with yogurt and tamarind chutney spiked with pomegranate, black salt and just the right amount of fiery coriander-chilli sauce.

“Should you have need of my services, I am at your disposal night or day,” Puri had told Kapoor after finishing every last morsel.

Then last week he'd played bagman for Mr. and Mrs. Pathak and got back their precious Roger from his kidnappers. How they could have brought themselves to pay the five lakh rupees was beyond him. It was a staggering amount—more than the average worker made in ten years. But what was even more shocking—“absolutely mind-blowing” in Puri's words—was madam's claim that

she would have paid ten times that amount after receiving the “traumatizing” ransom video that showed her pooch being “tortured”—lying on a dirty concrete floor rather than a silk cushion.

The detective almost wished he hadn’t bothered delivering the cash. He would rather have enjoyed the prospect of the kidnap gang carrying out their threat to eat Roger. And they would have done it too, given that they hailed from Nagaland, where pug kebab was considered something of a delicacy. But being “a man of his word and integrity, also,” Puri—along with his faithful team of undercover operatives—had caught the goondas by using a miniature pinscher as bait.

June had also brought in a few standard matrimonial investigations—although with the monsoon almost upon them, India’s wedding industry had taken a honeymoon.

And then there was the Jain Jewelry Heist.

Puri had caught the thieves. Within seven hours of receiving the call from his client, First National Hindustan Insurance Corporation Inc.

“These Charlies left so many of clues when they decamped with the loot, it is like following crumbs to the cookie jar,” Puri declared at the time, certain that he’d broken some kind of record.

But then he’d hit something of a brick wall.

Of the 2.5 crore of jewelry taken from the Jains’ multi-million-dollar luxury Delhi villa, Puri had recovered just two pairs of earrings, four bangles and a couple of hundred thousand rupees in cash.

Delhi’s chief of police gloated, telling the baying press corps that “amateurs” were not up to the task. And yet the chief fared no better, soon coming to the stunning conclusion that the gang had stashed the loot at some secret location between the Jains’ palatial residence and their hideout.

Desperate, the chief had then reverted to a “narco analysis test.” Although a violation of an individual’s rights under the Indian constitution—not to mention a form of torture according to international law—this involved injecting the accused with a truth serum and monitoring their brain patterns.

The results were comic at best. Under the influence, the gang members, who all giggled as they “deposed,” told their interrogators that they might care to find the jewelry in a variety of different locations. These included the top of Mount Everest and up the chief’s rear passage. Yet, when sober, they strenuously denied having taken anything more than the earrings, bangles and cash.

“That was all there was in the safe!” their leader insisted.

In the three weeks since, Puri had questioned everyone who’d had access to the house. He’d also put every known fence or dealer of stolen gemstones in north India “under the scanner” in case one of them had been passed the consignment. But to no avail.

“Only one case has slipped through my fingers in my long and illustrious career and that through no fault of my own,” Puri reminded his executive secretary, Elizabeth Rani, as he sat in his office at Khan Market that Saturday morning.

The Jain Jewelry Heist file lay on the desk in front of him. The words STATUS: CASE SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDED AND CLOSED, which he’d hoped to stamp in bold definitive letters across the front some days ago, were conspicuous by their absence.

“Even the most rare of diamonds has flaws,” he added. “Yet when it comes to Vish Puri’s performance, ’til date you will not find a single one.”

Elizabeth Rani had brought him a fresh cup of masala chai only to find the last one still lying untouched on his desk along with his favorite coconut biscuits. This was unprecedented. Usually the refreshments lasted only minutes. Things must be bad, she reflected.

“I’m sure it will only be a question of time before you locate the jewels,” she said, as supportive as ever. “It has only been a few weeks after all. No one evades sir forever.”

“Most true, Madam Rani, most true. Even Jagga, one of the most notorious dacoits to terrorize India ’til date, did not escape the net.”

Puri’s eyes wandered listlessly around his office, lingering on the portrait of his late father, Om Chander Puri, who’d served with the Delhi police. Next to him hung a likeness of the patron saint of private investigators, a man synonymous with guile and cunning—the political genius Chanakya.

The sounds of flapping feathers and cooing came from outside the office window as a pigeon landed on top of the air conditioner unit. The detective’s attention was drawn to the darkening sky beyond. A squall was brewing. It perfectly reflected his mood.

“Madam Rani, there is no point ignoring the elephant in the room: the case has gone for a toss,” he said. “I am clueless in every way and Mr. Rajesh of First National Hindustan Insurance Corporation Incorporated is getting worried—and justifiably so. What all I should tell him, I don’t know.”

“You visited the house again this morning, sir?”

“I have come directly from there, only. I was doing follow-up interviews of the employees. As you are very much aware, there has not been one shred of doubt in my mind from the start that an inside man or inside female was there. Some individual guided them—that much is certain.”

“Perhaps one of the Jain family, sir?”

Puri gave an exasperated sigh. “Naturally, Madam Rani, I considered that as a possibility some days back. But I am satisfied none of them were party to the crime.”

“Yes, sir.”

She eyed the clock. It was almost six. Sir was due to leave for the railway station in fifteen minutes. She was

growing concerned that he was stalling.

“Should I call the driver?” she asked.

Puri didn't seem to register her question. His eyes remained fixed on the Jain Jewelry Heist file.

“Who all provided the gang with the insider information? That is the question,” he said, half to himself.

“Sir, your car?” prompted Elizabeth Rani.

Puri looked up, puzzled.

“Ma'am must have reached the station by now,” she said.

By “ma'am,” she meant his wife, Rumpi.

The detective responded with a half shrug like a child who didn't want to take his medicine. “Really I don't see how I can go out of station. What with this case pending and all, it is really impossible. Should Mr. Rajesh of First National Hindustan Insurance Corporation Incorporated come to know, my reputation would lie in tatters,” he said.

Elizabeth Rani had feared as much. Given his workaholic nature, Puri was always loath to take offs. In the twenty-odd years she'd worked for Most Private Investigators Ltd., he and Rumpi had enjoyed only a few holidays away—and invariably these had combined work with pleasure.

Take that Bangalore trip four months ago, for example. It had coincided with an international conference on digital forensics and cyber crime. Since then, he hadn't spent a single day at home.

A short break would do him a world of good. And the exercise—the family was due to make the pilgrimage to the top of the Trikuta Mountain to visit the popular Vaishno Devi shrine—would be no bad thing, either.

Besides, Elizabeth Rani had made plans of her own. Tomorrow being Sunday, she'd be at home with her father. But she'd been promised Monday and Tuesday off as well and arranged to take her nephews to see a movie at Select Citywalk mall. She was also looking forward to doing some shopping in Lajpat Nagar, getting her eyebrows threaded and having tea with her childhood friend, Chintu.

How best to handle him?

It wasn't in her nature to bully. And arguing would get her nowhere. Any attempt to appeal to his need for time off would simply be met with a weary riposte like "Man was not made to sit idle, Madam Rani."

What was needed was a subtler approach. Sir, like most men, suffered from an acute fear of failure. If she could convince him that all would be well with the unsolved case, then she was in with a chance. A little massaging of his ego wouldn't go amiss, either.

"Sir, you owe it to yourself to take some offs," said Elizabeth Rani.

"And why is that exactly?"

"Such sacrifices you make of yourself every day, assisting people from all walks of life. No doubt everyone will understand if you are absent for a short while."

"And what if some Tom, Dick or Harry has need of my services for some emergency or other? What then? Lives could be at stake."

"That of course is possible, sir," she conceded. "Such incidents can occur at any time without warning."

"Crime knows no boundaries, nor distinguishes between night and day, Madam Rani."

"But it is not only here in Delhi that people require your valuable assistance. Who knows what might occur during the pilgrimage? What if it is your karma to be there on the pilgrimage?"

Puri despised astrology and all forms of stargazing, often describing it as a social evil that afflicted his fellow countrymen and women. Yet he was not altogether immune to superstitious thinking. Nor from perceiving himself as the sun around which the solar system orbited.

"Most true, Madam Rani, most true," he intoned. "Who is to say what the God has in store for us, no?"

He went thoughtfully silent for a moment, then added, "Naturally, duty to family is there also. They will be looking

for me to lead them on the pilgrimage.”

Elizabeth Rani reminded him that his senior operative, Tubelight, was also hard at work on the Jain Jewelry Heist case. He and his boys were trawling the underworld for any clues as to the whereabouts of the missing loot. “So it is hardly as if the case is lying idle,” she added.

Puri’s countenance began to brighten. “I suppose a few days cannot hurt,” he said. “It is a pilgrimage after all. Some blessings will be there. Perhaps the goddess will offer me some sort of guidance with regard to the case.”

“Some time away will help you see things in a fresh light, sir, I’m sure.”

“My thoughts precisely, Madam Rani.”

He picked up the file, put it inside the drawer of his desk and gulped down the second, still warm cup of chai. “To be perfectly honest and frank, I had already made up my mind to go,” he said in a confiding tone. “Just I was playing devil’s advocate, actually.”

He spent the next five minutes frantically packing his things and calling out reminders to his secretary to do this and that while he was away.

“Be sure to get Door Stop to polish the sign on the door each and every day.” “Ensure he doesn’t waste milk.” “Dusting of my personals is required, also.”

Elizabeth Rani noticed him slip his pistol into his bag along with a box of ammunition. This was unusual—Puri rarely carried—but then sir had received a tip-off recently that con man Bagga Singh, who’d sworn to “finish” Puri, was back in Delhi.

“I can be contacted night and day, round the clock, come rain or shine,” he said as he paused at the door. “Should any development be forthcoming regarding the robbery, I would want to know without delay.”

Elizabeth Rani watched Puri make his way down the stairs and disappear into Khan Market’s Middle Lane.

She closed the door, returned to her desk and relaxed back in her chair, relishing the silence. Although she was keen to get away as soon as possible and buy some Safeda mangoes in the market (it was nearly the end of the season and these would be the last she'd taste for the next ten months), she knew better. Sir would call en route to the station to remind her to attend to some of the tasks he'd already mentioned, and if the phone went unanswered he would have fresh doubts about leaving Delhi.

No doubt he would also need another pep talk to assure him that Armageddon wouldn't happen in his absence.

The phone rang five minutes later.

Elizabeth Rani was surprised to hear Facecream's voice on the line. "How is Goa?" she asked her.

At the mention of the word "emergency," her heart sank. "He's on his way to the station. You'll reach him on his portable," she said before hanging up.

So much for the nice quiet break.

Two

Clouds the shade of smudged charcoal rolled over Delhi like some biblical portent. A torrid wind spitting sand began to buffet the trees and stirred a maelstrom of loose leaves, twigs and plastic bags. The light took on an ethereal quality, the greens of the city's flora rendered psychedelic in their intensity. In Connaught Place, that paradigm of whitewashed British imperial architecture, tourists and locals alike ran for cover. Even the ubiquitous touts selling carved wooden cobras and Rajasthani puppets abandoned their pitches and took shelter between the colonnades.

The traffic thinned and bicyclists, motorcyclists and auto rickshaw drivers joined the beggars and migrant workers beneath one of the city's numerous overbridges. Dozens of black kites, giant wings stretched wide, wheeled and cried overhead. And then the first drops of rain fell—big, angry dollops that banged down on the roofs of cars and left long streaks on red sandstone facades.

Puri had always relished these summer squalls. As a child, when they'd rolled in from Rajasthan (as they generally did in the weeks preceding the arrival of the monsoon), he would run up onto the flat roof of his father's house in Punjabi Bagh. Despite the threat of lightning and strong, unpredictable gusts, he'd put his face up to the sky, relishing the sensation of cool droplets splashing down upon his flushed skin. Not even Mummy's chiding would persuade him to come down until the storm had passed and

the air was thick with the strangely intoxicating smell of steaming concrete.

This evening, however, he had no wish to get wet. He was wearing his favorite black Sandown cap and a new safari suit, a gray one made by his tailor, Grover of Khan Market. Besides, it was unseemly for gentlemen of his maturity and reputation to run around in storms. Such behavior was allowed only on Holi and when participating in a wedding baarat. Furthermore, the Jammu Express would be pulling out of the station in less than twenty minutes, and with the electricity knocked out by the storm and the traffic lights on the blink, the gridlock on the approach to the station was threatening to delay him still further.

Not even satellite imaging could have made sense of how the jam had formed. A vehicular stew, it bubbled with angry drivers honking and gesticulating at one another, the two-finger twist synchronized with a jerk of the head by far the tamest expression of their frustration. Puri watched, helpless, as the rain came down in earnest and gusts drove litter across the street. Everything was dripping wet now: the backpacker hotels and crowded eateries with their forlorn facades and cockeyed signs; the fruit-and-vegetable wallah's barrows on the half-dug-up pavements; the omnipresent crows perched on the sagging overhead wires. Only the beggar children seemed to be enjoying the downpour, broad grins of brilliant white teeth beaming from tawny faces as they danced in the puddles.

Handbrake, Puri's driver, inched the Ambassador forward and, with only ten minutes to go, finally turned into New Delhi Railway Station. Passengers were hurrying from their vehicles and dashing zigzag between waterlogged potholes toward the terminal building. Parking touts were gesticulating wildly like gauchos herding cows. Coolies in red tunics and soggy turbans peered through steamed-up car windows touting for work.

"Which train, saab?" "How many pieces?"

An elderly coolie, whose bare, sinewy legs showed between the folds of his dhoti, hoisted Puri's bag onto his head and set off for the terminal. The detective struggled to keep up with him—umbrella held at forty-five degrees against the wind, eyes fixed on the backs of the man's callused heels, which squelched rhythmically in his rubber chappals.

They'd covered about a third of the distance when disaster struck: a gust plucked away the umbrella as easily as a balloon from a child and sent it rolling across the car park. Puri had the presence of mind to clasp one hand to the top of his head, thereby saving his cap, but in so doing, he forgot to watch where he was treading. Looking down, he found his right leg knee-deep in muddy water.

With a curse, he hurried to the station building and took cover. His mishap had engendered a collective whoop from the crowd sheltering beneath the overhang. Many of them were still smiling as he brushed away the muck from his trouser leg. Puri could barely mask his displeasure at being considered a figure of fun. After being reunited with his umbrella, which was brought to him by a helpful parking attendant, he strode purposefully into the ticketing hall, water seeping from the sides of his shoe.

The security check beyond proved as haphazard as ever. The metal detector beeped constantly as departing passengers coursed through it unchallenged. The jawan manning the X-ray machine yawned. When the image of the detective's bag appeared on his screen, the impression of his .302 IOF pistol went unnoticed.

Puri, who had a license to carry the firearm, felt tempted to give the idiot a piece of his mind. Sloppy security had helped facilitate the success of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, after all. But he hurried on, deciding instead to report the incident upon his return to Delhi.

Finding the station's only escalator broken—BY ORDER OF THE STATION MANAGER according to an official notice—gave

him something further to grumble about. But once he'd climbed the steep steps up to the iron bridge that spanned the platforms, spied the roofs of the trains below and heard the lowing of the horns, his pulse began to quicken. Puri was still caught up with the romance of train travel. No other means of transport came close. With a car you simply got inside, told the driver where to go and sat back, a passive observer. Buses were even worse. But with trains there was ritual and expectation: pick up a couple of magazines from the A. H. Wheeler's bookstand; find your carriage; claim your berth; watch the stragglers hurrying to get on board; listen to the final whistle as the bogie shuddered forward.

There was no substitute for the tamasha of being amongst the jostling crowds of passengers in the stations, either. In New Delhi they were drawn from every corner of the country. While crossing the bridge, he found himself amongst Sikhs, Rajasthanis, Maharashtrians, Tamils and Tibetan monks. He passed a family of Gujarati villagers, who'd evidently disembarked from the Varanasi train and were carrying plastic containers of holy Ganga water. Behind them appeared a group of Baul minstrels, easily identifiable in their patched cloaks, their instrument cases tucked under their arms. All the while over the PA system came announcements about the departures of trains bound for some of the furthest destinations in the country—Jaisalmer in the Thar Desert; Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas; Thiruvananthapuram, a three-thousand-kilometer journey to India's southern tip.

If there was anything that provided Indians with a sense of living in one nation, it was the railways, he reflected. The Britishers had at least bequeathed that.

"Carriage number, sir-ji?" asked the coolie.

He'd been waiting at the bottom of the stairs on Platform 11 for his customer to catch up with him. Despite the heavy