

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

'I'm becoming too familiar with this place' he thought as he sat in the cool and comfortable hotel lobby waiting for his driver to arrive. He had been in India so many times before he had stopped counting. But people would ask and he would try to come up with a number that made sense.

'We got the contract a year and a half ago. We have a new project initiation meeting every two or three months. Twelve plus six, that's eighteen months, divided by two so it's nine, I guess. Probably not that many but it seems like I'm there every other week. That's what Sarah tells me at least.' His passport, once new and untouched despite all the European travel, was full of stamps from Indian immigration officials. So many, they covered each other in red mazes of characters and numbers too complicated for anyone to understand or make sense of.

He was looking at a group of three Europeans who were waiting

outside. 'That was me last year,' he thought 'before I knew what I know now'. The sun was blasting them like only a tropical sun can. Already their deodorants had washed down their sides and pools of sweat formed on their shirts. Two had taken off their jackets and loosened their ties. The other, tall, overweight and balding, was doing his best to keep his jacket and tie on. Even this far, Jeremy could see the sweat on his head forming in thick fat drops. His wet dome reflected the sunlight, giving him a faint halo. His colleagues were talking to him and Jeremy imagined them to be asking why he still had the jacket on. The tall man waved and refused to take it off. 'What an idiot', Jeremy said to himself, not caring if any of the Indians around him heard him or not.

Commuting in India was jumping from one air-conditioned place to another. From the hotel to the car, from the car to the office, from the office to the car, from the car to the hotel and so on. It made no sense to do otherwise. The air was always humid, and the sweat clung on to skin, clothes, hair, furniture - it would never dry up or evaporate. Still, successful Indians and Western visitors had their showers and put on washed clothes every morning. It was the sign of civilized stubbornness, a refusal to bend down and submit to the climate; to prove that Man will have His way even in impossible odds.

Jeremy hadn't met this week's driver yet. This made him nervous - it was important to have a good driver when coming to India. Jeremy had had some bad experiences in the past: too

smelly, English too broken, too reckless in traffic or all three together.

The drivers owned their own cars and this was something else that made Jeremy anxious. The thought of spending a week travelling back and forth in a beaten-up Kia with broken suspension again made his back ache in anticipation.

These drivers were freelancers contracted by the major Indian companies and then assigned to visiting businessmen for the duration of their stay. They were on call until released at the end of the day or whenever the businessmen decided. This had made an impression on Jeremy when he finally realised that, while he spent twelve or fourteen hours in a clean, ample office building, his driver was in his car in an underground car park, soaking up fumes and sitting awake in the dark waiting for that moment when his phone rings and it's time to get busy. This type of subservience, this type of mindless work and servitude was incomprehensible to Jeremy.

A small and compact silver Suzuki Swift arrived outside to pick up the Europeans. They struggled to fit in the back. It was designed for two short adults, or children, to fit, not for three large Europeans. After much shoe-horning and sweating, the one who still had his jacket on decided to sit in the front. He walked over to the right side of the car to enter but that was of course the driver's side. 'Not Brits then,' Jeremy thought, not displeased that his country had imposed their way of driving in

this part of the world.

'Your car is here, Sir', a deep East Indian voice startled Jeremy. He turned around to face one of the four doormen who rotated endless shifts at the hotel. They were all at least six feet four inches tall and broad-shouldered. Compared to most Indians they stood out as giants. They wore white uniforms that resembled something from colonial times, all epaulettes and gold buttons and trimmings. On their heads, wrapped with precision and skill, were dark blue turbans. Immaculate white gloves made sure they didn't in any way dirty or stain the luggage they handled.

Jeremy didn't thank the doorman and got up. The doorman rushed past him to get to the door first, his giraffe-long legs uncoordinated as they tried to walk faster than Jeremy, but not too fast so as not to seem rude. He opened the door for Jeremy and bowed with a submissive "have a good day, sir".

Stepping outside was like hitting a solid wall of hot. For an instant, his lungs didn't recognise the sweltering air as fit for breathing, and he bent over coughing. His chest contracted and expanded in rapid bursts trying to drag whatever oxygen it could get. When it reached his throat, it scraped and chafed all the way down.

He recovered and looked up. There were several pairs of eyes on him: the four doormen, the receptionist who summons the drivers from the hotel car park and the two porters who are on standby waiting for guests to arrive. All these people stood there with

their eyes wide open looking at him, mouths tense as if to begin speaking but yet unsure of what to say. He waved them off.

The driver reached for his briefcase and placed it into the boot of the car. He was short and fat, with puffy cheeks and bulging eyes. He wore an unwashed uniform with black shoes and a driver's cap that would not look out of place on a ship's bridge. The passenger door was open and Jeremy stepped into the dry, breezy inside. The car, a Honda estate, was old but comfortable, with forgiving comfy backseats.

The driver slammed the boot and dropped into his seat. He placed the cap on his head, checking on the mirror for symmetry and tucking some hair away from his forehead. The seat belts ignored as they always are in this country, they were off into the perpetual traffic of the city.