

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After the meeting, the executives at Mughal Motors had been quick to get rid of Jeremy. His behaviour had been unprofessional, shameful, and they feared his presence in the office could in some way reflect badly upon themselves. The hand-shakes were brief and he was pushed into an elevator bound to the ground floor.

When the doors opened, he wandered out with no real sense of direction or purpose except a need to get somewhere else. He found himself at the reception not sure where he was, lost and confused amongst the comings and goings of busy Indian professionals with their hurried pace and bumping briefcases. The only point of reference were the two girls who worked at the reception desk.

When Jeremy had come in this morning, he had struggled to learn from them in which floor Mughal Motors was. That was a simple request made hard by the language barrier and his short fuse. Now he wanted them to summon his driver: a much harder task

made worse by him not being sober. Yet, he had no other choice.

"Hey. Hey there. Get me my fucking driver."

The receptionists, with their matching bright saris, talked between themselves doing their best to avoid eye-contact with this rude foreigner.

"Hey you two," it was no use, as they pretended he was not there. Jeremy looked around, trying to find someone else who could help him. But who?

He picked up the phone on their desk and held the handset to his face, but who was he going to dial? Harshad had not given him a business card with his number like all other previous drivers Jeremy had. Now what?

The good-natured giggling from the girls in his time of distress set him off. He slammed his open palms on the table and that got their attention.

"I need my driver up here."

Pauses.

"With the car. Get me my fucking driver."

He was finding it hard to construct his sentences in English, and trying it in Hindi wouldn't make it any easier.

"Sir?"

They were looking up at him from their shared desk, eyes and mouths open. Jeremy wondered if "sir" was the only word they knew.

"My driver?"

He made engine noises and steering motions with his hands.

They shrugged and began to talk to each other again. Jeremy picked up and threw the phone to the floor - plastic battery cover flying loose and the handset wrapping its coiled cord around the desk's leg.

The girls looked at him with fear. They knew that none of the hundreds of Indian businessmen who passed the reception every day would ever hit them. But a foreigner? An Englishman? They didn't know what he was capable of, nor did Jeremy.

"Where's my fucking driver," he asked spelling out each word, "where's my fucking car?"

"A card, sir," they asked unsure. "A number to call?"

"If I had it I would call him myself, wouldn't I?"

"Card, sir?"

"Number, sir?"

Jeremy was losing his patience. He needed paan, a drink or whatever to relax and get himself back to the hotel to regroup.

The older girl looked at Jeremy expecting the worst to happen, while the younger girl gathered the phone from the floor, placing the batteries in the right place and returning it to the desk.

"His name is Harshad. He drives a silver Suzuki."

"Harshad," the girls corrected his pronunciation but didn't know who he was talking about.

"Yes, Harshad. Get me Harshad."

"We don't know any Harshad, sir," replied the younger girl.

Jeremy wanted to hit them. He wanted to drag them by their oily hair to the floor and stomp on their faces until they had become a single, unrecognisable paste. He looked up at the homogeneous fluorescent light and, unblinking, allowed the uniform brightness to calm him.

"Look, just tell me where the car park is, okay?"

That was easy enough for the the girls who, trembling, pointed to a side exit.

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The car park served the three buildings that stood over it. It was immense.

No attempt had been made to colour or letter-code it at all. The drivers knew where their cars were parked out of familiarity and memory built from repetition. They would enter the car park through its single ramp, navigate the maze of pillars in a pattern of sharp left and right turns and then park using a particular fire extinguisher, a flickering bulb or a prominent crack in the wall as a marker. The trip out of the car park later in the day would be the same, but this time using specific elevators or service doors as reference.

Jeremy stumbled along. He didn't know where to look for his driver. He had been to the lowest level in the underground car park, three storeys down, and back up to the top. Once, he had

opened a door, only to see the reception again - the girls long gone. A couple of hours ago they had pointed this way, but down here there was no one else to ask.

Turning corners, he'd be nearly caught by the cars driving his way. There was no space reserved for pedestrians and Jeremy couldn't keep his focus long enough to avoid straying into the middle of the lane.

Just as he was giving up any hope of making it back to the safety of the hotel, he spotted a small silver car in a dark corner, the constant dripping of a leaking ceiling pipe echoing as it hit the bonnet. Harshad would take him home. Harshad would give him some more paan to erase all memory of this dreadful day.

Approaching the car, his heart began to beat ever faster, as he could now make out the sharp-edged red "S" of the Suzuki logo. It was, as far as Jeremy was concerned, Harshad's car.

He sprinted the last few yards and opened the passenger door, meaning to fling himself in and get away from this place. But inside, there was no ever-smiling driver with a spotless white cap and uniform. Instead, a tall, middle-aged man with a sky blue turban and a thick beard was leaning back on the driver's seat, tie to one side and fly open, while a smartly-dressed petite woman with short-hair knelt beside him and sucked his cock.

Jeremy wasn't ready for this and neither were they. There was an instant as both sides pondered what to do, but the stranger acted first, getting out of the car and rushing Jeremy.

"I'm sorry, really," Jeremy never got to finish his sentence as the tall Indian pushed him to the floor and tried to kick him in the ribs. Jeremy grabbed his leg and forced him back to the car.

The woman screamed as they grappled on the other side of the passenger window. The Indian was much stronger and bigger than Jeremy and soon had two thumbs pressing into his windpipe, forcing it into the back of his throat.

Jeremy, who hadn't been in a fight since university, felt his head getting lighter and the pain blocking his thoughts. Reflexively, he yanked one of the man's hands from his throat to his mouth. He bit the Indian's thumb, his teeth going through skin, tendon and muscle as he ground them back and forth along the Indian's metacarpal bone at the base of his thumb. A taste of rusty metal flooded his mouth, and this made him bite harder, ever hungrier for more pain, the fury feeding itself.

The Indian had let go of Jeremy's neck and pushed fingers into whatever soft spot he could find on his face. Jeremy could feel the pressure on his eyeballs as they were forced into his skull, but there was no pain, just an awareness and an exalted sense of purpose in the fight. A sense of pride and aptness in establishing his will on another man.

And then it was all over.

Hands came from all sides and pulled them apart. Jeremy's jaw was prised open like a rabid dog's and his arms held behind his

back.

The three men who had stopped the fight also wore suits and had been startled by the noise as they had been walking to their cars. Jeremy's foe was kneeling on the cold grey floor clutching his almost severed thumb. A pool of dark liquid grew slowly under his hands. Jeremy's white shirt was bloodied and so were his teeth and the corners of his mouth.

The car's door opened and the woman ran away from the man, a jacket over head in a futile attempt to conceal her identity. Face, status and marriageability were more important than helping her lover.

The man who held Jeremy's arms let go and shouted orders in Hindi to his two friends. They led the injured fighter away to a nearby elevator. Jeremy turned to face him and was shocked to see it was one of the executives from the meeting at Mughal Motors.

In the formal, impersonal world of business, where personalities were reduced to fifty characters in a business card, Jeremy's feral look and expression was an essential reminder of every man's true heritage.

"Mr. Taylor, are you okay?"

"I need to get to the hotel."

The adrenaline was wearing off, and the jet lag, the paan, the fight and everything else was crashing Jeremy. An unbearable weight that brought him down, like a lead yoke he could not put down without going down himself too.

"Fine. Let me call your driver."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," said Jeremy as he held on to the man's sleeves trying to keep himself standing.

"No problem. Let me get Yuvraj down here."

"My driver is Harshad, not this Yuvraj."

"Mr. Taylor, please. You are very tired."

"You don't understand!" Jeremy was shouting now. "My driver is called Harshad. I need Harshad, now!"

"We've had enough trouble. Calm down please."

"I want my driver, the one you sent this morning to pick me up at the hotel. Just call him for fuck's sake."

"Mr. Taylor. We have no driver called Harshad in our company. In fact, we haven't assigned you a driver at all."