

"YES SIR I KILLED MY DAD" --- "II" PART

The Trial of Palande

Arun Tikku Murder Case

Introduction: The Trial of Palande is part of the "Yes Sir, I Killed My Dad" Trilogy. Now, the story moves to the trial stage of the Arun Tikku Murder case as Anuj Tikku reaches Mumbai to give his testimony as the key witness in the case and finally stands in the witness box. Armed with his truth, he is facilitated by Inspector Srikant Tawde, Gitesh Kadam, and Public Prosecutor Ujjwal Nigam. But the game of chess has just begun as he has to face his nemesis and the murderer of his father in court. The accused, Vijay Palande, Dharanjay Shinde, Manoj Gajkosh, and Simran Sood, await him along with their respective lawyers. Twenty-five witnesses have already given their testimony in the case, and now it is Anuj Tikku's turn to give his version of the events that led to the slaughter of his beloved father. Hang on to your seat belts, folks; this is the beginning of a rip-roaring courtroom drama.

Prologue

Vijay Palande, a convicted serial killer accused of five murders, has been languishing in Taloja Jail for over eleven years. Eleven long years have passed since Arun Kumar Tikku was slain by his men in the apartment of his son, Anuj Tikku. Time has passed as the case proceeded at a snail's pace. Despite two high court orders, the case has moved very slowly. So much so that one of the assailants of Arun Tikku, a man by the name of Manoj Gajkosh, has even been granted bail after languishing in jail for a decade. The reason given by the judge is that Manoj has been in prison for over a decade; everyone deserves a free and fair trial; the life sentence is for twenty years, which means he has spent half of that time in jail. Even though Manoj was identified as one of the assailants in the identification parade, he still got bail. Simon Sood, the honey tarp, got her bail after spending one year in jail; only Palande and Dharanjay remain incarcerated. This somehow is perfect timing for Anuj Tikku to deliver the truth to the courts and remind the world about the heinous act committed by Palande against his beloved father. The grip of the law seems to be loosening on the gang. Anuj has to deliver his witness testimony before the door slams shut. He has to make sure that his voice is heard and that the law does not loosen its grip on Vijay Palande and Dharanjay Shinde, who mercilessly stabbed Arun Tikku.

Anuj has been waiting for this tryst with destiny, as he is finally called to testify and take the witness stand. It is not going to be easy. Anuj will have to go through the horrors of 2012 and relive the horrid memories again. But he must go beyond his fears and deliver the killer punch that will surely seal Palande's fate and take him to the gallows. "We will ask the judge for the death penalty; this is the rarest of rare cases." Ujjwal Nigam told Anuj as he sat comfortably on his leather sofa in the Residency Hotel in Fort. "Anuj has been waiting for this tryst with destiny, as he is finally called to testify and take the witness stand. It is not going to be easy. Anuj will have to go through the horrors of 2012 and relive the horrid memories again. But he must go beyond his fears and deliver the killer punch that will surely seal Palande's fate and take him to the gallows. "We will ask the judge for the death penalty; this is the rarest of rare cases." Ujjwal Nigam told Anuj as he sat comfortably on his leather sofa in the Residency Hotel in Fort. "Sir, I am ready and will not disappoint you. I have to avenge my father." Anuj replied with all the truth in his heart.

The day has finally arrived, and Anuj is preparing to confront his nemesis. "I have done my homework, sir, and I will deliver my truth to Elan." Anuj Tikku seemed ready for a showdown with the serial killer Palande.

The book "The Trial of Palande" is a courtroom drama where Anuj confronts his nemesis on the witness stand. He has to do it in the nick of time and ensure that his father's murderers remain in prison till the final judgment is passed by the sessions court, and that day is still a few years away as twenty-five more witnesses are yet to deliver their testimony. As he arrives for a final duel with Vijay, the case is only fifty percent over; it is at the halfway mark.

Anuj soon realizes that his case number, 548, is an angle number and a promising one according to numerology. He is getting intuitive hints from the universe that he is headed in the right direction, and his beloved father's spirit will guide him along the way. The universe per se is conspiring with him and egging him on, along with the diligent cops of Unit Nine's crime branch in Bandra.

Anuj has made some allies along the way. Kadam, Srikant, and Ujjwal will be by his side, helping him tell his side of the story.

This courtroom brawl will be a fierce duel that will finally decide Palande's fate and help the court reach a final judgment. According to the cops, he is the star witness, the venting son. A son who has grieved the loss of his father for decades, and now he has to return to Mumbai for a final duel.

"This is a very evil man, Anuj; we must get him to the gallows." Words uttered by helpful police officers. "He is also cunning; he has learned a lot about the law in jail and has been reading extensively on his case. You will have to be at your most confident best to tackle this swine; there cannot be room for errors as what you say in court will be the final words." Kadam told Anuj, quietly egging him on. This is going to be a courtroom drama for all readers to relish.

The book The Trial of Palande has been compiled through extensive research of the Arun Tikku Murder Case documents, criminal files, all original witness testimony given to the session court, and live courtroom testimony.

In the loving memory of my dad, Arun Kumar Tikku, I miss you dearly and see you amongst the stars at night. I know you are watching over me.

"Vishnu gives you a very long rope, and then he just tugs at it; that's what happened to Palande."

Anuj Tikku

"Usko kuch nahi mila Jail mein dus saal tak sadh raha hei wo, pagal ho gaya hei jail mein."

Sharpshooter Sooraj

"Uska gaand maar diya tumne wo expect nahi kar raha tha apka attack."

Hawaladar

"Himanshu Roy also had a colorful past; he would take injections to build his muscles; rumor has it he had AIDs, not cancer; he was also fucking Simran Sood."

Gitesh Kadam

"Hapus mango khao sir, and just enjoy life. Let Palande rot in jail for ever. Salla dus saal se na Diwali manaya hei usne na holi. He is finished."

Srikant Tawde

"All gangsters fear me; see this letter from Abu Salem; he respects me so much."

Ujjwal Nigam, Public Prosecutor

Chapter One: Revenge is Sweet

It had been over six months since I had last visited Mumbai to be briefed by Gitesh Kadam and Srikant Tawde. I had been avoiding this moment for a long time, but it was inevitable that one day, I was going to face the killer of my dad, Vijay Palande, in court. After all, it had been over eleven years since the fateful night of April 7, 2012. I had immersed myself in writing my books and had just finished one more book on the case when my phone suddenly beeped, "Hello! "Anuj, sit Kadam here, aka testimony ka time a Gaya; you will be taking the stand on the 28th and 29th of April. Please book your tickets." Gitesh Kadam told me as if giving me an order. "Oh! So, finally, Ujjwal Ji has set a date for my testimony in the session's court.

How long do you think it will take? "I will book my hotel accordingly," I replied rather meekly, and there was a slight thump in my heart as the moment of truth had finally arrived. "I think you must be in Mumbai for over a week; your testimony might take three or four days, sir." "We are counting on you; your testimony will nail the bastard; finally, you are our star witness." Kadam went on to say: "I will then book my tickets." I replied. "Yes, also go through your testimony and memorize everything; you must stick to the police story and not deviate from anything. We will do another rehearsal when you come here. It would help if you also met the Investigative Officer Kamte when you are here. Remember, he was the one who showed you your suicide note when you were called on May 15, 2012. He will also brief you. We will have to review all the evidence, including the photographs of your property papers and the list of your assets that Vijay Palande had taken from his mobile phone. You must verify all this in court, so be prepared when you reach the city." Gitesh gave me some helpful tips and instructions; it was clear that he wanted me to be prepared to take my stand in court as the key police witness in the Arun Tikku murder case.

"I will memorize the sheets we made; I also have them on my mobile," I replied, looking at the documents that were my testimony in the case—the time had finally come for the son of a slain father to take his revenge and redeem himself. I felt nervous as I realized that I now had a massive responsibility on my shoulders. I had to make sure that I got my testimony right. I felt a tingle on my toes and abruptly got up to stroll around my garden in Dehradun. My house has a massive

garden with colorful, blooming flowers. I had to ensure I would keep my mind and get each word of my testimony right.

"You are our star witness." Anuj, sir, you will have to take the stand now. We will always have three policemen in plain clothes for you during the court proceedings. I will also be there with Tawde Ji, but you must keep to yourself and stay in your hotel room while you testify. Don't inform anyone that you will be coming to Mumbai, and no one should know that I, Ujjwal sir, have bribed you well in advance. It should look like you have come directly to court from the airport itself." Kadam informed me. I was aware that I would have to keep things secret as now, but my heart felt full, and I could not hold back my emotions as images of my past flashed before me. I could see pictures of my father being stabbed repeatedly. I could feel the tension and his helpless cry for help as he banged on the French window in my flat as Dharanjay Shinde was repeatedly stabbing him. I felt a shiver down my spine, and my hands became cold. My body became tense. I tried to close my eyes and take deep breaths, trying to get the bloody images out of my mind, but it was not easy. The more I tried to forget the murder of my father, the more the thoughts came back to me. This was going to be a big deal, and as the son of a slain man, I had to fight to get my father justice; this was the last thing I could do to honor his death. I had to give my testimony and get it over with. It was time for a showdown with Vijay Palande, and I would finally face the swine in court after almost eleven years. I would come face-to-face with the infamous serial killer to finally avenge my dad's death.

But first, I had to book my tickets, get a hotel, and finally make an itinerary. I scanned the net, made my booking, set up a hotel, and then finally made an itinerary. I watched the net and made my bookings, but unfortunately, the Bloom Hotel in Pali Hill, where I had stayed on my previous trip to Mumbai, was complete and booked. I finally booked the Oriental Residency Hotel in Khar West, about a minute's drive from the Bandra Unit Nine Crime Branch office. I knew it was vital to book a hotel near the crime scene, as I would be taken in the police jeep every day to the sessions court in Fort. Once the bookings were made, I turned my attention to the sheets of paper lying on my bed. I needed to memorize my testimony by heart so that when I took the stand, I would not make any mistakes. Gitesh had already briefed me on that.

This week would be challenging for me, and I knew it thoroughly. This would also test my acting talents; it felt like I was in a play of my own making. I had my lines in front of me on five sheets of paper. I had to memorize my lines, and I rehearsed in front of the mirror, ensuring that my expressions came out nicely. This was going to be the run of my life; this was going to be the real test of my talent. More so, this was not a film set or a stage; this would be the witness box in an open court with the judges, lawyers, cops, public prosecutors, and clerks. This would be a very different stage; no movie was set here, and I had to test my acting skills in a courtroom. The stakes here were very high. On a movie set, I could give many retakes. Still, in front of a judge, I had to be bang on—no mistakes, no fumbles, no show of fear or hesitation—and I had no window to make any mistakes or deviate from the official story that had been submitted as my sole testimony in the court of law. There was no room for error, and I would not get a single retake here. If I made a mistake and deviated from the official narrative, the defense lawyers would spot it and jump on me. Their goal would be to discredit me and my character and try to find holes in my story. They would try to negate the police narrative that it was Vijay Palande who had planned and executed the murder of my father. To win the case and get a conviction for Palande, I needed to stick to the facts and my narrative; there was no space for me to make any mistakes. I had to stick to the chronology of events as they took place and deliver my lines with Elan in an open court. I had to convince the judge in such a way that he solely believed in my truth and my narrative; that was the only way to get a conviction and avenge my slain father. I was nervous, but I knew I had read my lines well, and with my shadow practicing in front of the mirror, I could make the lines my own.

Yes, this would be sweet revenge, and somewhere deep in my heart, I relished the duel with Vijay Palande. "He has no lawyer, Palande; he will be repressing himself; the other three accused have lawyers; each of Dharanjay's lawyers is a cheap one, you know, the ones provided by the government for poor people. Simran's lawyer is Prashant Pandey. He feels he might get some publicity from the case. But he is no match for Ujjwal ji; you have nothing to worry about." Gitesh Kadam had told me over the phone when I called to inform him about my flight bookings and the hotel I would be staying in Mumbai. "You are my guest, Mr. Anuj." I will come and see you in the evening. Do call me when you land in Mumbai. We will go through your testimony again." Gitesh said, exuding confidence.

For me, the moment of truth I had finally arrived after eleven years. I had avoided the face-off for a long, but now the time had come to take on Vijay Palande and his murderous gang face-to-face in court, and I wanted to be damn sure about the lines I would be delivered in an open session court in Fort. I knew that people would watch my every move and hang on to every word I said in court. I knew very uncomfortable and awkward questions would be thrown at me. I would have to answer each of the questions thrown at me like darts on an open board, and I knew that I had to stick to my testimony by the T if I had to be believable. There would be no room for error, and I could not fumble my lines as this was not a film set or a theatre stage; this was real life—a murder case in which the Mumbai cops and the judge eagerly awaited my testimony.

I wanted some moral support, kind words of guidance, someone to listen to my fears and calm my nerves, and at this point, I could only turn to Geoffrey, my beloved astrologer and spiritual guide, for over five years. Geoffrey was a citizen of New Zealand. Now in his early sixties, he spent more than two decades in India, living in Uttarakhand and Uttarkashi's many ashrams and meditation centers. He had come to India in his youth to find spirituality and learn yoga, astrology, and meditation. He fell in love with India and stayed back for decades, only returning to his homeland occasionally. He had disconnected himself from his family and people in New Zealand and taken himself to India like a fish to water. He wandered the country like a spiritual monk, and like the American Ram Das, he traveled all through the hills and mountains of India seeking spiritual guides and gurus looking for salvation and moksha. At a time like this, I needed to hear from him. I met Geoffrey through a familiar friend in Dehra Doon and then met him a few times in Delhi. I had taken a liking to this quiet and genial man who always looked assured and happy. He had a lot of astrology knowledge and had memorized many Sanskrit shlokas that he could recite with Elan. I had taken his advice many times before and enjoyed talking to him. He was a learned man who would listen to my fears, always ready to give me his observations and advice on important matters.

"Geoffrey, Hi! I know it's been a while, but I am at a critical juncture. I need some advice from you." My father's murder case, the trial I told you about, well, I just

got a call from the cops in Mumbai. I will have to take the stand next week and give my testimony. I am a bit nervous. This is going to be a difficult period for me. I can't falter now. I have to do my duty as a son and get the swine convicted. I need some of your astrology, Gyaan." I said pensively that I was seeking reassurances from Geoffrey, whom I considered a spiritual friend who could probably foretell my fate.

"Ah! So, the moment of truth has come after all this time. Yes, I can get a vibe from you; it's a clean, crisp vibe. You will need all your strength when you take the stand. Remember at all times to stick to your stand and try to answer Yes and No. If you are unsure about the answer, say you don't remember or can't recollect collect. Listen, brother, listen, listen, and listen; don't just jump and answer. I have been on many jury duties. The courts run on facts, and the defense will look for loopholes in your story. They will try to puncture your narrative at all times. You have to be very alert and attentive. Remember, the fewer emotions you show in court, the better; stick to cold, hard facts." Geoffrey blurted out his advice to me; he knew I had called him for his insights into what the future holds for me and what my stars could foretell.

"You have a small window of time before Rahu and Ketu come back into your charts; you have a very narrow window. You must deliver your testimony in the nick of time and finish it. Remember, this is only about your father's case, not the other cases Palande is involved in. Get it right the first time and then be done with it." Geoffrey gave me his advice, which I was eagerly seeking. "I am proud of you, brother; you are going to battle with a very evil man who is guilty as hell, and the whole world knows it. The only thing is that the session judge should also believe your narrative. I can feel the soul of your father watching over you. Be assured he will be there in court with you. You will not be able to see him, but he will be with you with all his heart. His soul seeks revenge and redemption and will not rest in peace until justice is delivered." Geoffrey went ahead and explained it to me. "It's a tricky period for you, brother; one wrong move and the entire case against Vijay could fall apart like a pack of cards. But I know you are strong and can do it, so be positive and attentive. You will need all your inner strength and gut feel to get through this. These are challenging times for you. I will do a prayer

session to get some positive energy into your charts. You will need the blessings of your dad, who still watches over you." Geoffrey said we spoke over the phone. "I am currently in New Zealand. I am afraid I can't be there for you in person, but I will pray for you. You take care and muster all your inner strength for this testimony in court; you will need every ounce of your energy to win this battle. It will not be easy; immense pressure will be on you in the courts, especially during cross-questioning. But my best wishes are with you as always." After saying this, the wise man from New Zealand hung up.

I took a few deep breaths and sat upright on my bed in a yogic posture. I had to absorb his advice and steady myself. The best way is to meditate and go inward at times like these, and I did just that.

It was all set. My flight to Mumbai was booked for the 26th of April, and I got busy packing my bag for a most important journey. This would indeed be the run of my life, a test of my skills and talent. I had to convince the court that Vijay Palande was the mastermind and that it was his gang that was responsible for the brutal killing of my father.

Mumbai is a city that does not want to let me go. Somehow or other, the city keeps pulling me back into its fold. When I landed at Terminal 2, I headed straight for my hotel in Khar, just a kilometer from the crime branch unit nine station. I had to stay someplace nearby; this was the closest hotel to the station that could give me a booking.

The hotel room was smaller and dingier than what I was used to, but it was well-kept and had a large window, good enough to watch the early morning traffic. I was happy that I had come two days in advance, giving me plenty of time to review my testimony with Kadam. "We can't make any mistakes." Anuj, Sir, the media would also be watching, and people are keenly interested in this case, so

you need to be in Mumbai a few days before you take the witness stand in court.
"Kadam had aptly advised me.

"Hello! Kadam, I am at the Oriental Residency Hotel; you can come over with the case files. Let's go through it finally and get the testimony right. I don't want any confusion in the courtroom. Will I see Ujjwal tomorrow at the Residency Hotel in Fort, or will you take me straight to the court?" I asked if I needed to call Gitesh and inform him of my arrival in the city.

Yes! I will be there in the evening, and we can discuss over dinner and get all the facts together for the case. That bastard is a big mother fucker, and we have to be very alert with Palande. I have gotten two men in plain clothes to follow you in and out of the court. That is for your safety. You do not need to waste time hanging around in court once you have testified. Go straight back into the police jeep. The underworld may have some guys on motorcycles around the court; a sharpshooter may be assigned to bump you off, so be vigilant and on your guard at all times, Anuj sir." Kadam explained to me about my security and how the cops had planned to shield me from any attacks from the underworld. There have been many incidents of courtroom shootouts where witnesses were shot at in cold blood, even inside the courtroom. There were horror stories of judges who had been shot at in court. It was simple: sharpshooters from the underworld gangs would dress up as lawyers and walk into the court with false identities, then before the witness took the stand, they would open fire and kill the witness. Even cops had been shot at in bright daylight. So there was a real danger to life in and around the court." I saw in the news that this UP gangster, Atiqe Ahmed, and his brother were shot at point-blank range when the cops were taking them for a medical. Two soap shooters with press passes moved in and shot them in front of TV news cameras. "Can't I get a bulletproof vest and a helmet? Also, what if they shoot me on the way to court inside the police cordon itself? I saw these gangsters being shot in UP."

I don't want to meet the same fate; it's hazardous, Kadam." I told Gitesh I was still unsure how full-proof my security would be. "Yes! I will be there in the evening, and we can discuss over dinner and get all the facts together for the case. That bastard is a big mother fucker, and we have to be very alert with Palande. I have

gotten two men in plain clothes to follow you in and out of the court. That is for your safety. You do not need to waste time hanging around in court once you have testified. Go straight back into the police jeep. "The underworld may have some guys on motorcycles around the court; there may even be a sharpshooter around assigned to bump you off, so be vigilant and on your guard at all times, Anuj sir," Kadam explained to me about my security and how the cops had planned to shield me from any attacks from the underworld. There have been many incidents of courtroom shootouts where witnesses were shot at in cold blood, even inside the courtroom. There were horror stories of judges who had been shot at in court. It was simple: sharpshooters from the underworld gangs would dress up as lawyers and walk into the court with false identities, then before the witness took the stand, they would open fire and kill the witness. Even cops had been shot at in bright daylight. "So there was a real danger to life in and around the court."

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"Your case number is 548, and it's the Sessions Court of Greater Mumbai." Prashant Pandey, Atul Pandey, and Advocate Mhatre will represent all four accused. Vijay Palande will be defending his case alone because he has no money

for a lawyer and has gone bankrupt completely. We will take you to court in our brown Bolero jeep for the hearings; it might take three or more days until you give the entire testimony. The accused's lawyers will also cross-question you, so be attentive, Anuj sir." Gitesh informed me about my case.

The night was spent with Kadam, having fried chicken, single malt whisky, and Ratnagiri mangoes. "You know that the Chiplun area also falls in the Ratnagiri District; it is famous for its mangoes," I remarked as Kadam served me mangoes of the highest quality. "You need to tell the court that you came directly to Mumbai in a private vehicle, and if they ask you if you were also arrested along with them, just deny it. Stick to our narrative; if you don't remember a detail, say you don't. Palande is cunning; he will try to trick and instigate you. You have to be very steady." Kadam continued his advice, and we both dived into a plate of butter chicken, enjoying it with naan. It is safe to say I had a good rapport with the cops, who were very sympathetic to me and my cause. In fact, Gitesh also walked in with a few of the old letters that Dad had written to me when I was studying in Manchester; this was his way of giving an emotional touch to the entire situation. "Harami stabbed your dad sixteen times; you cannot forget this and will never forgive Palande. If I show you the postmortem photographs, you will break down.

My routine in Mumbai was simple: I would wake up at eight in the morning and have my breakfast by nine. Gitesh would call me up, and I would meet him outside the hotel, and he would take me to the crime branch office on his electric scooter. Armed with bags full of case files and papers, we would move towards the crime branch office at Bandra Pali Hill. I would then hang around the office area, sitting with Kadam, and most of the time, I would stare at the cuboids full of crime files. The office was small and dingy, and occasionally, we would be served tea and water. My eyes fell on a large, tall cupboard with Vijay Palande's crime file and the words "Macoca" written on it with a black felt pen. This serial killer was no doubt giving the police sleepless nights; he had so many cases on him that the case documents could not fit in a tiny cupboard; they needed an extra-large cupboard for his crime files. The man was so ruthless and such an evil man. But I

could also sense a very steely determination from the police force to nail the swine finally.

We would then drive towards the fort area. Our first stop was always the Residency Hotel, which was almost like a second office for Ujjwal Nigam. He would always arrive half an hour late with his white Bolero Jeep accompanied by five black cat commandos armed with machine guns, always alert. The public prosecutor had Z-grade security, and why not? He had put so many criminals and murderers behind bars. He needed all the protection the state could provide. In Maharashtra, Ujjwal is like a god in law circles. I managed to chat with him at our many meetings and would pick his brains as to how he felt the case was progressing and when Palande would finally be booked. "I would then drive towards the fort area. Our first stop was always the Residency Hotel, which was almost like a second office for Ujjwal Nigam. He would always arrive half an hour late with his white Bolero Jeep accompanied by five black cat commandos, all armed with machine guns, always alert. The public prosecutor had Z-grade security, and why not? He had put so many criminals and murderers behind bars. He needed all the protection the state could provide. In Maharashtra, Ujjwal is like a god in law circles. I managed to chat with him at our many meetings and would pick his brains as to how he felt the case was progressing and when Palande would finally be booked. "See, Anuj, we are going to ask for the death penalty. The man had done so many murders; he has also been convicted, and the court has taken cognizance of this in the past. Even while canceling his bail in 2013, the high court stated that the police had done a shoddy investigation, so even the police are now determined to see the back of him. You have to stick to the story we have bribed you with." As he sat gently on the sofa, occasionally typing away on his mobile, Ujjwal informed me that he would get distracted by the odd call but was attentive to my words. "We would then drive towards the fort area. Our first stop was always the Residency Hotel, which was almost like a second office for Ujjwal Nigam.

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"We will ask for it for sure, and if not, they will be locked up till the end of their lives with our parole. You know, like the gangster Abu Salem, I was the one who got him from Portugal through an extradition treaty. He will not come out of jail till 2030. We spared him the death penalty as Portugal had stated that they would only let him go to India because he would not be given the death penalty. See, I have a letter that Abu Salem wrote to me." Saying this, Ujjwal pondered his lather case file and handed me a piece of paper: a handwritten letter from the dreaded gangster Abu Salem. It was written by hand with red ink. The writing was in Hindi, with a few English words here and there.

I took the letter from Ujjwal's hand and read it. Abu Salem was praising him and saying nice things about the ace prosecutor." he took the letter from Ujjwal's hand and read it. Abu Salem was praising him and saying nice things about the ace prosecutor. "Sir, ap mere idol hei, aap ne mujhey hanging se bachaya, aap Mumbai ki shaan hei." The letter stated that the dreaded gangster was all praise for the great lawyer who had brought him back to India from Portugal to face the music. The dreaded gangster was showing his respect for the hangman of Mumbai, even though Ujjwal put him back in jail. Abu did not seem to hold any grudge against him and praised his intelligence and skill to the hilt.

"Yes! You are very famous in Maharashtra, but in the north, Ram Jethmalani and Kapil Sibal ruled the roost. Sibal is the darling of the politicians in the north, and Ram has always been known as a great litigator. Both charge over ten lakhs for one appearance." I told Ujjwal as I handed the letter from Abu Salem back to the lawyer, who gently put it back into his leather case file.

The lobby of the Residency Hotel has a lime juice fountain, and I would sip a few glasses of lemon juice from time to time as my throat would dry up with all the talking. The manager and the servers recognized me from my visits in the past and would greet me with admiration from time to time. I would stroll around the hotel, smoking a cigarette, staring at the passersby and the hustle and bustle of the market. They're where photocopy shops, restaurants, fruit juice stalls, cigarette and pan shops, and shops selling paintings and books are located. Much was always at the Jai Hind restaurant. I often had lunch with Gitesh, Tawde, and the Bolero driver. The meal would be mutton curry prawns with rice and soul curry, which is our favorite, and we would have to pay at most two hundred rupees each for lunch. After lunch, we decided to move to the court; our vehicle would follow Ujjwal's Jeep right up to the session court.

Chapter Two: Case Number 548

It was a hot day in Mumbai, and I was wearing black—a poor choice indeed on a hot summer day—but somehow, I managed to hop out of the police jeep as Kadam grappled with the three huge bags full of case files and documents. I looked at the grey bags full of files; it was like I was staring at the urns and mortal remains of my father. I had cremated him years ago, but he and his life were reduced to pages in a case file today. It was like he had never lived and meant nothing to the world. I moved slowly towards the sizeable gothic session court building reminiscent of the British Raj. The architecture was seventeenth-century. "Hello Anuj ji, this is Sooraj. He will be the officer in plain clothes. He is here just for your security. See, he is also armed just in case of an attack on your life." Gitesh Kadam introduced me to Sooraj, a dark-bellied cop in his forties. He was wearing a blue shirt and brown trousers. "Hello Tikku ji, I am your security for the day. Just stay close to me. After your testimony, I will take you to court and back into the jeep." Sooraj extended his hand, and I gave him a tight handshake. This was all very dramatic, and I felt like the central character of a Bollywood Mafia movie.

I was the star witness who had come to avenge his father's brutal murder with all the apparatus of the state behind me, Z plus security, and an ace public prosecutor all wanting me to nail the swine called Vijay Palande.

I walked ahead with Sooraj in tow. The first thing was the security check. I slipped my brown bag into the X-ray machine and looked around. I could see chatty cops and lawyers walking in and out of the building, entering lifts. I could see cops taking criminals and petty thieves to court. There were teenagers and many juvenile criminals who were being taken to court. The corridors of the sessions court were full as we took the lift and walked up to the second floor. I was escorted by Sooraj to a waiting room with a wooden table and desk and asked to wait until my case number was called. I saw Ujjwal Nigam walk ahead of me as some of his old clients greeted him. A fat, chubby lady started discussing her case with the ace lawyer.

"Sir Arun Tikku Murder Case: You are his son, I believe." A genial man with a wiry frame asked as he sat on a wooden bench in the waiting room. 'I am Anuj's son, and I must give my witness testimony, case number 548.' I said, looking at him intently. "Sir Arun Tikku Murder Case: You are his son, I believe." A genial man with a wiry frame asked as he sat on a wooden bench in the waiting room. "Yes, I am Anuj's son, and I have to give my witness testimony, case number 548," I said, looking at him intently. "Yes, I know it's been going on for a decade, but recently, the case has picked up, and over twenty-five witnesses have testified." The man explained that he no doubt had worked in the court for a long time. "So, how many more witnesses are there?" I asked the genial man. "Sir Arun Tikku Murder Case: You are his son, I believe." A generous man with a wiry frame asked as he sat on a wooden bench in the waiting room. "Yes, I am Anuj's son, and I have to give my witness testimony, case number 548," I said, looking at him intently. "Yes, I know it's been going on for a decade, but recently, the case has picked up, and over twenty-five witnesses have testified." The man explained that he no doubt had worked in the court for a long time. "So how many witnesses more to go than," I asked the genial man. "Well, twenty-five more, I guess, are his son, I believe." A generous man with a wiry frame asked as he sat on a wooden bench in the waiting room. "Yes, I am Anuj's son, and I have to give my witness testimony, case number 548," I said, looking at him intently. "Yes, I know it's been going on for a decade, but recently, the case has picked up, and over twenty-five witnesses have testified." The man explained that he no doubt had worked in the court for a long time. "So how many witnesses more to go than," I asked the genial man. "Well, twenty-five more, I guess, and even though the Karan Kakkad case is going on, twenty-five more witnesses are left in that case as well. Both cases have around fifty witnesses each. Despite two high court orders to expedite the cases, the cases have been dragging on. But then this is the court; nothing moves here; the only thing that moves here is paper and files, but no judgment. Once you are here, you get trapped in its large corridors. Cases have been going on in this court since 1987; one case has been going on since 1978. Yet no verdict has been arrived at." The man gave a dry laugh and then coughed abruptly. I looked towards the door, hoping that Kadam would appear, take me to the courtroom, and finally put me on the witness stand. The air was dry, and it was a hot day. All I could see were lawyers walking in large black robes, police inspectors and constables, law officials moving from one end of the corridor to another, and people walking in and out of old lifts with rusted steel shutters. This place smelled

of crime—rotten crime—as criminals handcuffed by the cops moved from one room to another. A case was being heard in every room, and busy judges clutched large files.

"Anuj sir, come, we must go; your case will be herded." Nigam sahib is also there. Come fast, please." Gutesh urged me to move, and so I did. I stood up in attention and dragged along behind him, with my gunman Sooraj right behind me.

As I approached the entrance door of the courtroom, I spotted the swine, Vijay Palande, for the first time after eleven years. We barely looked at each other. I just glanced at him; he had put on weight, maybe ten kilos. He almost had a double chin and a protruding belly. The strange thing was that he had gone completely bald. Palande was wearing a white shirt, black pants, and black shoes. He was carrying a black leather bag that had lost much of its sheen due to the wear and tear of the case. It looked like Vijay had been using the back bag throughout this case. I waited far behind him and then moved into the courtroom behind Ujjwal Nigam. As the judge had yet to arrive, I was asked to sit on a chair next to the witness box.

I looked right in front of me and saw Manoj Gajkosh sitting in the accused box, also wearing a white shirt and black trousers. It looked to them as if black and white were the standard attire of under-trial criminals kept in high-security jails. In front of me, on wooden chairs, sat the three lawyers of the accused, as Vijay took his place and sat on the extreme left. The witness box was situated just next to the entrance gate, and it had a glass shield on it with Mike on the left. There was a bottle of water near Mike. "Would you like to sit or stand? I can give you a chair; it will be a long session, Anuj ji." Srikant Tawde asked me as I walked towards the stand." he looked right in front of me, and I saw Manoj Gajkosh sitting in the accused box, wearing a white shirt and black trousers. It looked to them as if black and white were the standard attire of under-trial criminals kept in high-security jails. In front of me, on wooden chairs, sat the three lawyers of the accused, as Vijay took his place and sat on the extreme left. The witness box was

situated just next to the entrance gate, and it had a glass shield on it with Mike on the left. There was a bottle of water near Mike. "Would you like to sit or stand? I can give you a chair; it will be a long session, Anuj ji." Srikant Tawde asked me as I walked towards the stand. "No, no, it is OK. I want to stand. I wouldn't say I like to sit. I like to move my legs. It helps me think better." I retorted.

I looked at Palande, who was busy taking out files from his rusty leather bag; he was wearing gold-rimmed steel glasses and was looking directly at the judge who had just arrived. Everybody in the court stood up; there must have been about thirty people, more than a dozen cops. The judge took his seat, and a constable asked me to take the stand. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer. I took three deep breaths to steady my mind and thighs. I could see images of my slain father flash in front of my ears. His soulful face was staring at me. He wanted justice, and it was now my time to give him that so that, finally, his aching soul could rest in peace in the heavens.

I moved into the witness box and looked through the glass in front of me, then I pressed the button to do a check and sipped three large gulps from the bottle of mineral water. "Put your phone on silent. Kadam told me gently, almost whispering, from behind me. I removed my phone from my brown leather sling back and muted it. I had saved a few numbers there, which included my old mobile number and the number of the landline phone Vijay had gotten connected to in my house.

"Please take the oath." A female clerk gave me her orders, and two stenographers were on either side of the judge typing away. "Mein jo kuch kahun ga saach kahun ga saach ke siva kuch nahi kahun ga, so help me god." I said my oath, kept my hand on my heart, and then looked towards the accused box.

"Please point out towards the accused to identify them," the judge S.U. Hake asked me to do it, and I solemnly did. A female clerk stood before me with a

laptop and a video image of Dharanjay staring at me from the screen. A corona-masked mask covered his face, but I recognized the devil and pointed at him. I then turned and looked at Vijay Palande and then at Manoj, who was sitting right at the end near the white wall in the accused box; he hardly looked at me when I pointed toward him.

"OK, Anuj, kindly give the statement you gave to the police." The judge, Mr. S.U. Hake asked me. Hake Sahib was a short, portly man. He had black bags around his eyes and was going bald from the middle. He wore dark black plastic-framed glasses and sat on the judge's chair with a slight hump, almost stooping onto his desk. He held his pen and scribbled away as I slowly started speaking my sentence aloud. "Please use the microphone and look at the judge when you speak." A female clerk corrected me. I tried to steady myself, not wanting to lose the chain of my thoughts. I knelt into the microphone and began my witness statement.

"I met Simran Sood in 2010; she was introduced to me by music director Jaan Nisar Lone. She was making a music album in his studio, and I met Simran through Jaan Nisar as her friend.

Simran came over to my house several times; we were only acquaintances. It was through Simran Sood that I met this man, Karan Sood." I said, pointing my fingers at Vijay Palande again and again. Vijay stared at me, and I glared at him back. He took off his star after I kept glaring at him. "This was in their flat in Oberoi Springs, and Simran introduced me to Karan as her brother. I would occasionally meet them in their flat for drinks. In early 2012, when I went to the Oberoi Springs flat, Karan introduced me to Dharanjay as his friend and said that Danny works with him. Karan Sood told me he was in the property business and also owned a restaurant in Spain. "I gained the courage to look at Vijay, who was now looking straight at the judge.

"It was then that Karan suggested that if I had a spare room in my flat, I could rent it to a Spanish consulate lady, Nevis Legenza, for a monthly rental of thirty thousand rupees and a two lakh deposit. We went to the Bandra registrar's office to get the contact registered. Dharanjay was there, and Nevis Legenza, the Spanish lady, was also there to sign the agreement. There was one other witness to the contact whose name I cannot recollect." I said it clearly to the judge. A lady clerk picked up a file and showed me the agreement; it was exhibit 22. I pointed at the witness's signature and said, "Yes, these are the signatures of the witnesses." I identified the photographs as those of one of the accused, Dharanjay Shinde.

I was then shown photographs of my father's document, where he had made a list of all our properties and bank accounts. Vijay had taken pictures of these documents when he had come to stay with me for two days. At the same time, he had done a reiki of my house and even figured out the best place to run from. He saw the bathroom area and the duct from where Manoj and Dharanjay escaped. Kadam and I had visited Inspector Kamte a day before, where the I.O. of this case, Kamte, had shown me the photographs sent from the forensic lab. They opened Palande's Blackberry mobile phone and analyzed its content inside the mobile. They found pictures of my father's documents. "You will be shown these in court; you need to tell the judge the content of these documents and why your father wrote them." The IO Kamte had instructed me that it was all part of my police briefing.

So when the clerk in the court showed me the pictures, I identified them and told the judge that these were kept in my drawer, and Palande took pictures of them when I was asleep. I was then shown another exhibit, that of my suicide note. I expelld to the good judge that IO Kamte had directed me the suicide note and that I wrote it, and the signatures were mine, and Vijay had asked me to write them so that he could put pressure on my father as he had been neglecting me. On hearing this, Prashant Pandey's lawyer got up and said, "Objection, my load, this is a lie; it is the police who have asked him to say this; the police have briefed the witness in advance." Saying this, the lawyer waved his hands in the air. "Let the witness speak; don't interrupt his testimony." The judge admonished Prashant

Pandey, a middle-aged man with a dark complexion. Wearing a black robe, he looked hassled throughout the hearing.

I looked at the judge with soulful eyes as if thanking him for his rebuke and continued with my testimony, which I had so diligently rehearsed in front of my mirror. "On the 7th of April, Vijay told me that we would be going to Goa. I informed my father of the same but told him I was going for a shoot. In the evening, I and my friend Mithilesh Tiwari went to Shree Ji for dinner. In the night, at around nine p.m., I let Manoj into the house. He showed me a bag of paints and said Dharanjay Shinde had sent him to paint the flat as the Spanish Consulate required. Then I left the flat and moved into Palande's Mercedes Benz parked outside the building. When I drove a few kilometers and stopped for dinner at a roadside eatery, I paused as Prashant Pandey got up and asked, "Do you remember the mobile number?" Prashant Pandey asked. "I looked at the judge with soulful eyes as if thanking him for his rebuke and continued with my testimony, which I had so diligently rehearsed in front of my mirror. "On the 7th of April, Vijay told me that we would be going to Goa. I informed my father of the same but told him I was going for a shoot. In the evening, I and my friend Mithilesh Tiwari went to Shree Ji for dinner. In the night, at around nine p.m., I let Manoj into the house. He showed me a bag of paints and said Dharanjay Shinde had sent him to paint the flat as the Spanish Consulate required. Then I left the flat and moved into Palande's Mercedes Benz parked outside the building. "When I drove a few kilometers and stopped to have dinner at a roadside eatery, I paused as Prashant Pandey got up and asked, "Do you remember the mobile number?"

Prashant Pandey asked. "Yes, I don't remember it by hand, but it is stored in my mobile phone. Give me a minute." Saying this, I put my hands in my jeans pocket and checked my iPhone; the number was stored in my contact list. "I looked at the judge with soulful eyes as if thanking him for his rebuke and continued with my testimony, which I had so diligently rehearsed in front of my mirror. "On the 7th of April, Vijay told me that we would be going to Goa. I informed my father of the same but told him I was going for a shoot.

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paints and said Dharanjay Shinde had sent him to paint the flat as the Spanish Consulate required. Then I left the flat and moved into Palande's Mercedes Benz parked outside the building. "When I drove a few kilometers and stopped to have dinner at a roadside eatery, I paused as Prashant Pandey got up and asked, "Do you remember the mobile number?" Prashant Pandey asked. "Yes, I don't remember it by hand, but it is stored in my mobile phone. Give me a minute." Saying this, I put my hands in my jeans pocket and checked my iPhone; the number was stored in my contact list. "Yes, it was 8275065968," I replied.

"Do you remember the MTNL number of the phone that Vijay Palande installed in the flat?" Prashant Pandey asked me, "Do you remember the MTNL number of the phone that Vijay Palande installed in the flat?" Prashant Pandey asked me, "Yes, it was 26392091." I replied again by reading the contacts on my iPhone.

The steno typists constantly typed away as my day's testimony was recorded." Then a phone came on Karan Sood's mobile phone, and he replied to the caller, Tum Kuch bhi karo wanha se nikal jao. I asked him who the caller was, and he said it was a friend whose wife had been bugging him for a long time. I then fell back to sleep for a while, and it was through this journey that I lost my mobile phone." I explained to the judge in a clear and precise voice.

"By eight, we arrived at Karan Sood's Chiplun farmhouse, where I met his sister, Sulekha Shinde, and brother-in-law, Ganpat Rao Shinde. I said hello to them casually. It was then that Ganpat Rao asked Karan Sood the last time he had come in a BMW, and now he has come in a Mercedes Benz, to which Karan said that he sold the BMW and, with the money, bought a Mercedes Benz. We rested for the day in the farmhouse, but in the evening, Karan left, saying he had some important work and that I should wait and relax at the farmhouse, which I duly did. The next day, Dharanjay also left in the afternoon, so I thought, "Why should I wait?" I duly left. I took a private bus, paid him Rs 500, and left for Mumbai. When I reached my building, I was told by the guard that my father had been murdered, so I left for Oshiwara Police Station, where I met Inspector Rupwate, who

informed me about my father's murder. I then gave my statement to the police." I rattled on from the five pages I had memorized well.

Here, an agitated Vijay got up to question me: "Can you tell me the number of the bus and where it arrived in Mumbai? Do you have a ticket for the journey?" Vijay Palande asked me bluntly as if he were mocking me and my testimony. Something snapped within me at this point, and I shouted at him. "You fucking swine, you mother fucking swine, you murdered my father with sixteen stabs, you mother fucker." My voice boomed in the court, and suddenly, everyone got up. Kadam ran towards me, the cop standing on the door moved towards me, and I was pulled out of the courtroom. Tawde and Ujjwal Nigam came rushing out as I was asked to sit on the bench outside the courtroom. "Did he kill your father? Did he kill your father? You have no right to stop me. I will kill him here in open court." I was in a trance of anger, and my genuine emotions came gushing out. "You sit on the bench, Anuj. We will get you some water. I can understand your emotions. Even Karan Kakkad's brother started crying when he testified against Palande." Kadam tried to calm me down. I was in a huff, and sweat was pouring down my forehead. My body was shivering with anger. If I had a gun, I would have killed him in open court. The entire court noticed the chaos, and the judge ordered an adjournment. "It was here that an agitated Vijay asked me: "Can you tell me the bus number and where it arrived in Mumbai? Do you have a ticket for the journey?" Vijay Palande asked me bluntly as if he were mocking me and my testimony. Something snapped within me at this point, and I shouted at him. "You fucking swine, you mother fucking swine, you murdered my father with sixteen stabs, you mother fucker." My voice boomed in the court, and suddenly, everyone got up. Kadam ran towards me, the cop standing on the door moved towards me, and I was pulled out of the courtroom. Tawde and Ujjwal Nigam came rushing out as I was asked to sit on the bench outside the courtroom. "Did he kill your father? Did he kill your father? You have no right to stop me. I will kill him here in open court." I was in a trance of anger, and my true emotions came gushing out. "You sit on the bench, Anuj. We will get you some water. I can understand your emotions. Even Karan Kakkad's brother started crying when he testified against Palande." Kadam tried to calm me down. I was in a huff, and sweat was pouring down my forehead. My body was shivering with anger. If I had a gun, I would have killed him in open court. The entire court noticed the chaos, and the judge ordered an adjournment. "Order, order, please. We cannot

continue with the witness testimony today. "The court will close proceedings for the day." S.U. Hake spoke sternly while he violently slammed a wooden hammer on the table.

Kadam ran into the court with a paper stating that the proceedings for the day were over and the proceedings would continue tomorrow. I decided to leave the court because I wanted a cigarette to relax. As I stood out of the court, and a few policemen who had noticed the chaos in the proceedings turned towards me. "Wo harami hei! Aap ko excite kar raha hei, ke aap testimony bhool jayein. Usko ignore Karo." The cop told me The Hawaldar standing next to him said with a smile, " Us chutiye se kisi ne asi baat nahi kari hogi, aap ne uski izzat ka janaza nikal diya aap great ho sir ji," saying that he gave me a pleasing smile.

I turned towards the narrow street outside the court and stopped at a cigarette shop to take a pouch of pan masala. I knew that today's proceedings were over. I suddenly realized I had left my brown sling bag on the witness stand and shouted at Kadam." I turned towards the narrow street outside the court and stopped at a cigarette shop to take a pouch of pan masala. I knew that today's proceedings were over. I suddenly realized I had left my brown sling bag on the witness stand and shouted at Kadam. "Gitesh, my bag is in the court; please get it. I left it in the witness box before I came out." As I said these words, Kadam ran into the court and, within minutes, got my brown sling bag to me.

"Anuj sir, jaldi jeep mien bethiye, don't hang around in the court area; you don't know who is ready to shoot you. "There are gangsters on motorcycles; they might just take a shot at you." The driver of my brown Bolero Jeep advised me to get into the Jeep for my safety. Soon, I was whisked off into the Jeep by my sharpshooter, Sooraj.

Gitesh Kadam arrived sometime and kept all the case documents at the back of the Jeep. Within minutes, we were out of the court area and into the streets of Fort, far away from the courtroom.

"Aap ne to phaad diya uska; he looked stunned when you showed him your Virat roop, salla! "Chup ho gaya," Sooraj told me he was mocking Vijay Palande.

We drove towards an Iranian cafe in Crawford Market and decided to have tea and Maska Pau. I sat on an empty table with the cops; Kadam ordered tea and a maska bun, which arrived within minutes. "Is Caffe mein Tezaab film ka shooting hua tha, Madhuri Dixit and Anil Kapoor film? She was a waitress in this cafe, pure shooting idhar hua tha." Sooraj informed me as we sipped our tea and feasted on maska buns.

"Yes, I remember it had a very hit song, Ek Do Teen; it was a super hit film," I replied, chewing on my bun. Soon, the bill arrived at two hundred rupees. "No, sir, my treat, I will pay," I replied and paid at the cafe counter. The owner, a Parsi gentleman, handed me the change, and we all walked out and steeped inside our Jeep, which now headed towards the Bandra Pali Hill area.

I felt tired but also vindicated. The showdown I had been waiting for finally arrived, and I stood my ground as the victim's son. I let the world and even Vijay know I was not here on pussyfooting and would take him on in the open court like a fierce tiger. I had announced my entry to the open court with full enthusiasm and force.

"You know your case number, Anuj, sir," Sooraj asked me. "You know your case number, Anuj, sir," Sooraj asked me. "Yes, I do; it's case number 548, but why do you ask if it's significant?" I retorted to Sooraj's question. "You know your case

number, Anuj, sir," Sooraj asked me. "Yes, I do; it's case number 548, but why do you ask if it's significant?" I retorted to Sooraj's question. "Yes, it is an auspicious number in numerology: 548 is an angle number. It is a good number; it states that angels watch you in court. It's a divine sign that you are on the right track." Sooraj replied, giving me details on the significance of the number 548.

"How do you know if you're into astrology too?" I asked Sooraj. "How do you know if you're into astrology too?" I asked Sooraj. "Well, I have studied palmistry and also read books on numerology. It's a divine number; there is a force watching out for you; it's just my intuition, but all will go well for you; relax and speak your truth, that's all." Sooraj told me

I felt relieved that, as tension loosed, if the gods and angels were with me, I could take on this devil with their blessings. Sooraj's prophecy soothed my nervousness, but I knew further days of battle left as I would have to return the next day to continue with my witness testimony.

I spent the night with Gitesh Kadam in the sanctuary of my room. We ordered some single malt whisky with chicken and paneer kababs. "Aaaj aap ne sahi dose diya sale ko, phat gaya uska gaand, he was not expecting your sudden attack. Sixteen stab wounds. You are an excellent actor, Anuj Sir." Kadam massaged my ego further. "I had to give it back to him; these emotions were pent up for ages within me; they just came out spontaneously, Kadam. I could not help myself." I said politely to Kadam, and then I took a delicious piece of kabab into my mouth, and it instantly melted on my tongue. "I am proud of you, Anuj ji. You have suffered a lot. Only a brave and talented man like you could have the courage to take on an evil man like Palande. Frankly, no one was expecting you to give your testimony so thoroughly, Ujjwal Sahib, and said drug addict he doesn't know how well he will be able to do on the witness stand. We all had doubts, but on this first day, we are sure you will do well in the subsequent proceedings. Today was the first day, but you have gotten your rhythm back. I could see that in court. The other thing is, don't look at us when you give your testimony, nor don't look at Ujjwal ji; it will look like we have promoted you. The judge should feel this is your

true testimony, not the one cops have coaxed you to give." Kadam explained to me.

"Yes! I will now only look into Palande's eyes when I talk in court, but I am prepared. Rest assured, I have to nail this evil swine and avenge my dad's death. It is my duty as a son, and I feel that my father and his soul are watching over me over me. Sooraj said, "My case number 548 is an angle number; the gods are watching over me; I have nothing to fear." I explained with confidence.

We ordered a biriyani, which duly arrived in time. "You like Hapus mango? I come from Ratnagiri, which is famous for mangoes. I will give you some. I am your friend now. Whenever you are in Mumbai, you will be my guest. I am like a brother to you, Anuj Ji." Kadam said he was showering praise and his Kripa on me. "This room is rather small; don't you think the hotel that you stayed in previously had a larger room? This room is very stuffy." Gitesh replied as he surveyed my room. "It's ok; this was the best hotel I could book near the crime branch office," I replied.

"You will have a long day tomorrow; you might have to stand for four to five hours. I suggest you revise your statement sheets again. I am sure you will sail through if you stick to your story and the facts of the case. Speak through the microphone and look at the judge while you answer the questions thrown by the defense lawyers." Kadam tried to give me a few more tips; he was my cheerleader throughout the case, and why not? He had worked hard for over two years getting all the witnesses to testify. Sometimes, I even go to their houses to get them.

Chapter Three: Anuj vs. Palande, the duel begins

I knew that this would be a very long week for me, and what was important was to maintain my fitness and sanity, so I went out for a long walk early in the morning to get all my juices flowing into my body. I walked through Carter Road, the Khar area, right up to Santa Cruz. This was a long walk through the streets of Bandra, and I was up for the challenge.

I had a sparse breakfast of idli and sambhar and some melon juice to ensure a full stomach and enough energy for the court proceedings.

My routine was the same as the day before. Kadam called up at nine in the morning, and I was ready to meet him at the corner red light near my hotel, Oriental Residency. Kadam arrived in the nick of time, and I hopped on his arrogance, which whizzed past morning traffic. I sat in the back seat without a helmet, and we soon arrived at the Bandra Crime Branch office. I waited in the police station, chatting with the officers busy peering into computer data, trying to find clues.

They've got files and paper all over the place. I realized that getting justice is more about handling files and paperwork. It did frustrate me that it had taken so long for my murdered father to get justice.

I sipped tea in a paper cup and then starched my legs. I walked to the cigarette shop and bought a pouch of paan masala, " Ek Rajni Gandha aur ek cigarette." I pleaded with the shopkeeper, and soon Gitesh Kadam arrived and gave a hundred rupee note to the shop owner, saying, "Here, let me pay. I have been enjoying your hospitality all this while." Gitesh Kadam told me as he paid my cigarette bills.

We soon moved into the brown Bolero Jeep assigned to me to take me to the fort and the sessions court. Sooraj, my sharpshooter, was with me in the back seat as my cover against the Vijay Palande gang.

I felt like I was on Krishan's chariot, with the Jeep and Giesh being my charioteer. Arjun was moving to Kurukshetra, ready to battle Palande and company.

The duel had begun well, and the first few punches had already been thrown. It would be a toe-to-toe fight, no holds barred; the gloves were off, and this would be a fistfight in court. I had to deal with my demons if I was to succeed and win. I had to win this duel as it was going on. To be the run of my life. I was an actor. I had rehearsed my lines and done my preparation, and now I had to deliver them on stage, which for now was the court of law itself.

We reached the Residency hotel by eleven; it was a coincidence that my hotel was also called Residency. The Jeep stopped near the pavement of the hotel as Kadam got out with three bags full of case files. The best place to sit and rest for a while was the hotel lobby, with a large flat TV in front of it on the wall. An IPL match was happening between the Kolkata Knight Riders and Mumbai Indians. I tried to steady my mind and watch the game, but the guests' constant coming and going broke my concentration.

The driver of my Jeep sat next to me and then tried to converse with me: "Anuj sir, aap younger days mein bahut handsome hoga na?" The driver threw a question at me. "the driver of my jeep sat next to me and then tried to converse with me: "Anuj sir, aap younger days mein bahut handsome hoga na?" The driver threw a question at me. "Yes, I have acted with Shah Rukh Khan. I used to be slimmer then, but over time I have gained weight, but I used to be fit then." I replied. "the driver of my jeep sat next to me and then tried to make a conversation with me: "Anuj sir, aap younger days mein bahut handsome hoga na?" The driver threw a question at me. "Yes, I have acted with Shah Rukh Khan. I

used to be slimmer then, but over time, I have gained weight, but I used to be fit then." I replied. "Yes, you are a brave man. You must have done a lot of meditation in your life. Only a man with inner spiritual strength could bear what you had to endure." The driver was excited that I was now freely chatting with him.

"You should also try Bipasha and Bra-ham Kumari; they also have perfect meditation. I got to an ashram; which ashram did you get to?" The driver, who was a short man with dark skin and a wafer-thin mustache, asked me

"I went to OSHO Ashram in Pune; it has Kundalini and the morning rose meditation. I enjoyed the Pune ashram a lot; they have a great German bakery, food, and pies." I replied to the Jeep driver.

"Aap ke baap ka saya, aap se cheen liya us rakshas ne, aap ko badla lena hoga." The driver also tried to console me and, at the same time, give me confidence.

"I will try. I am here for just that. I have to see the bastard hang. The swine must pay for his acts; in fact, he is already paying for them; he has been in an ANDA cell for eleven years, eating jail food and living in mosquito-infested barracks; jail life is horrible." I retorted to the driver, who was now bored, and tried to fix the air collar in front of us.

Soon, Ujjwal arrived in his white Bolero Jeep, followed by five black cat commandos, all given to him by the state for his security. The hangman seemed to be in a good mood, wearing maroon trousers and a dark blue shirt. I felt he was overdressed for the occasion but still wore his black lawyer's robe. He sat beside me on the sofa and said, "All ready, Anuj, we had to cancel the session tomorrow, but today, you must remain calm and answer the question with all your alertness." Ujjwal told me like a headmaster speaking to his pupil. Yes, I always

saw Ujjwal Nigam as a headmaster who was there to put hardened criminals in jail and discipline them.

Our lunch place was Jai Hind, and this time, I had prawn curry and crab with rice. Srikant Tawde and Kadam kept me company as our Jeep driver sat beside me on the table, enjoying a plate of mutton and rice. "Bhut mirchi hei gravy mein," I told Kadam. "Eat, eat, you need the energy, and have lime juice. It was boiling before we got to court. Have some sugar cane juice, too; it will help in this hot weather." Kadam lectured me on my food and drink.

The Fort Market area is always crowded. I was very familiar with this area as I had spent two years working in Mumbai in 2001 and 2002. I was a brand manager with Satyam I Way then, and it was my job to help promote the I Way chain of cybercafes. "You know, Gitesh, I came to this area often while working as a brand manager for Satyam I. Ways. Many of my cybercafes were in this area; we had more than fifteen, and all were very profitable. I would come here often and dine with the cafe owners; we did one huge promotion called the "Dil Chahta Hai." In promotion, we distributed free movie tickets with an I-way internet card. The promotion was a huge hit, and within three months, I made the cyber cafe hugely profitable.

"Yes! I see you are back in Mumbai. This city loves you and is not letting go of you, Anuj." Srikant overheard our conversation and added his two cents to it. We had a leisurely lunch, and after smoking a cigarette together, Kadam loaded the Jeep with his grey bags full of police files. I jumped in the back seat with my bodyguard and sharpshooter, Sooraj. "I have loaded the gun; it has eight bullets; anyone who fires at you will get it back; just try and stay as low as possible and don't hang around the court after you have given your testimony." Sooraj showed me his gun, a licensed handgun with a black handle. I felt relieved that I was in safe hands and at least had protection during this trying period of my life.

We drove towards the session's court but stopped at a sugar cane stall for some sugar cane juice. "Wo Sala Palande khatam ho chukka hai, he has no money for a lawyer; he is fighting his case. Even in jail, he has to wear a strap and an armband around his hand so that the authorities know he is a parole jumper. This time, we are making sure he does not get away. We have also cut all his friendly cops and weeded them out of the system; most of his cop friends have been shunted to irrelevant departments. Usko ab koi nahi poochta; his days are numbered now. He also knows that but does not show it; he is still fighting the case as if he is innocent, and we are all waiting for the judgment to come through." Kadam told me as we dragged sugar cane juice, and I quietly watched the bustling traffic move past us.

After the much-needed juice break, we drove directly to the court. My Jeep stopped next to Ujjwal Ji's, where Bolero Jeep I hopped out of my police jeep and, along with Sooraj, moved into the court area after going through the brief security check.

This time, I was asked to wait on the ground floor. The cupboards and room were full of files and broken wooden cupboards. Four stenographers were typing away. I sat on a wooden chair and was soon approached by Ram Singh, a short man with white leucoderma marks and patches over his face. His skin was coarse and dry, and he had an unshaven stubble. "Sir, I am Ram Singh." I work as a clerk here in the court. I called you almost two years ago, do you remember?" He asked me, "I don't recall," I replied. "I had asked you to come to Mumbai for your testimony; that was Corona times, and you had refused to come. I even spoke to your lawyer, Advocate Bhardwaj, on the matter; do you remember now?" Ram Singh asked me with a confused look. "Yes! Yes, no, I remember I got a call from Mumbai a few years ago. Yes, I remember now, so it was you." I told Ram Singh after jogging my memory for a while.

"Yes, sir, I have your statement here. Please see. Make sure you get the chain of events right." Ram Singh put four sheets of stapled paper in front of me. "Oh! Ok, I will go through it." I took the sheets and started reading them.

"How many more witnesses will be examined in the Arun Tikku murder case?" I asked Ram Singh

"Well, we have about fifty witnesses, twenty primary and twenty secondary witnesses; the rest are forensic and police witnesses, but your testimony is crucial as you are a key witness and the son of the murdered man.." Ram replied. I sat quietly watching the hula bulla in the galleries of the court. Lawyers and police officers walked in from one corner to the other. "Well, we have about fifty witnesses, twenty primary and twenty secondary witnesses; the rest are forensic and police witnesses, but your testimony is crucial as you are a key witness and the son of the murdered man," Ram replied. I sat quietly watching the hula bulla in the galleries of the court. Lawyers and police officers walked in from one corner to the other. "Sir, why don't you sit down? I see you are very unstable; you keep walking from one corner of the room to the other. Why don't you just sit on the chair?" Ram told me after seeing me pacing up and down the room. "Oh! I am quite hyper; even when I was working in the corporate sector, my bosses were livid with me. I was called a bull in a china shop as I was seen seated on my desk." I replied, trying to give an excuse for my constant pacing around the room. I managed to take a leak in a smelly toilet marked "only for official use."

Soon, Gitesh Kadam arrived. "We have to go. I just got a call from the prison staff. The accused have been brought to court and are going towards the courtroom. Today will be a long day for you, Anuj. Palande will question you and the defense lawyers will also do a cross." Kadam informed me as I took several deep breaths to prepare myself mentally for the ordeal.

I walked into a waiting lift with Sooraj and Gitesh Kadam in tow and hurriedly moved towards the courtroom. I walked into the room and sat on a wooden chair offered to me by a Hawaldar next to the witness box. Now that I was more familiar with the process, the court waited for the judge to walk in.

When the judge arrived, I moved onto the witness stand and retook my oath, speaking firmly into the microphone.

It was Vijay Palande's turn to question me. The dose I had given him on the first day made an impact, as he started referring to me as Anuj Ji all along. After every question he asked me, he referred to me as Anuj Ji. My attack on the first day paid off. I had shown the serial killer that I meant business and that I was not the drugged-out, confused, and absent-minded individual he had taken advantage of decades ago. Throughout the trial, he has treated me as Anuj Ji with the utmost respect. The table had turned. I was not a helpless victim anymore; I was a man out for revenge, a man who was determined to avenge his slain father.

"Tell me, Anuj Ji, how many lifts are there on the first floor of your Samarth Angan flat?" Palande asked me his first question, and there was his first salvo.

"Two lifts, as I remember, sold the flat in 2013, but I remember they were two lifts," I asked crisply.

"How many lifts are in the entire building?" Palande asked his next question.

"I have no clue; I don't remember at all," I replied

"Do you know how many floors are in the 3A block?" Palande asked me.

"I have no clue at all, but I imagine there must be more than twenty; precisely, I wouldn't know," I replied

"Do you know where the car parking is in your building?" Palande asked

"There's an open parking lot at the bottom of the building," I replied again after jogging my memory.

"How many medical stores are near your building, and how many banks can you tell me?" Palande threw another question

"Two medical stores and one bank in my neighborhood area," I replied, briefly closing my eyes and trying to visualize my old Samarth Angan area.

"Can you identify the photo of your building?" Palande asked me

On cue, Gitesh Kadam, also helping the court clerks, opened a file titled "Exhibit 5" and thrust it in front of me. I took a look and replied. "On cue, Gitesh Kadam, who was also helping the court clerks, opened a file titled "Exhibit 5" and thrust it in front of me. I took a look and replied. "Yes, that is my flat, and that is the French window of the first room; it was on the right side of the entrance."

"Now I want you to see the map area of your flat and tell me which was your bedroom," Palande asked me. Again, Kadam thrust a file, which carried the map of my flat, in front of me. I took a good look, and my flat area was marked with a yellow felt pen. I saw it a couple of times and then replied. "They are at the back

of the flat area after the drawing room, and the guest room is also at the back on the right.

"How far is the ledge from the French window, do you know?" Vijay asked me.

"One to two feet away," I replied

"How many other buildings in your society can you tell me, Anuj Ji?" Palande Tree opens another question.

"I think four; they're where four blocks are," I replied again, closing my eyes to remember the complex where I had stayed for years.

"Is it true that you were under drug rehabilitation treatment in Jodhpur for a year?" Palande asked if he was trying to discredit me and show the court that I was a drug addict who was going through mental health issues. He was now playing tricks on me and trying to show the court that I was not a reliable witness.

"No, that is false, untrue, and a black lie," I confidently answered.

"What about your brother, Samit Tikku? He had come to the Oshiwara Police Station and paid two cents to the police so that you would not be charged. Is it not true that you were also arrested in Chiplun along with me by the Unit Eight

team led by Inspector Gokhale and Sub Inspector Shiva Kumar? You were arrested at Chiplun and taken to Mumbai; tell me." Palande went on the offensive.

"No, that is false." I took a private bus from Chiplun and arrived in Mumbai." I replied

"Do you remember the number of the bus? Can you show me a ticket that you purchased?" Palande went for the jugular.

"No, it was decades ago, and I slept through the journey, so I don't recollect the route or where the bus stopped in Mumbai." Palande persisted with this line of questioning; he knew the facts: I was arrested with him in Chiplun, and the cops had asked me to change my story as per the statement submitted to the court. He knew that the cops had coaxed me to change my story. If I said I was arrested in Chiplun, I would also become a co-accused, so I had to stick to my false tale here. Palande was instigating me to make a mistake so that he could prove I was lying.

"Is it not true that you were also taken for a medical after your arrest to the Cooper Hospital?" Saying that he showed a photograph of a newspaper cutting with me being held by a cop informant of the Cooper Hospital.

"No, that is false." I was in shock after I heard of my father's murder. When I reached my flat on the 10th, I was informed of my dad's murder by the security guards, and then I went to the Oshiwara Police Station, where I met Inspector Rupwate and gave my statement to the police." I replied, showing utmost confidence.

"Why are you lying?" Anuj Ji, you were arrested along with me; you even gave your fingerprints; the police took your prints; you were a co-accused. "Your

brother bribed the cops so that you could be let off; two crores were given to Deven Bharti, and with his blessings, you were let off," Palande said with a booming voice that he knew he had to strike me now so that I would falter.

"No, that is a lie; it is false. After hearing about my father's murder, I went into shock. My left side was paralyzed completely, and it was me who asked the cops to take me to the hospital so that I could be treated. The doctors gave me painkillers. The photo is of that time when it was me who asked the cops to take me there." I replied with utmost confidence now that I was racing my voice as the battle of wits had begun.

"You are lying under oath; the police have asked you to give this testimony, and don't look at Ujjwal Ji when I am questioning you; you have been prepped in advance," Palande said, looking at me with disdain.

"That is utterly false." I came directly here from the hotel, and this is my true statement; nobody has coaxed me at all." I replied, and for a brief moment, I glanced at Kadam, who gave me a thumbs up.

"You are a drug addict. Everyone in society stayed away from you. Tell me how many society meetings you attended while staying at Samarth Angan." Palande threw another salvo at me.

"I had no interest in society's matters and felt no need to attend any of the meetings," I replied calmly.

"Is it not true that you were a nuisance and no one liked you? You would wear OSHO robes and jump in the coat yard in the morning, and most people thought

that you were insane." Vijay Palande said he tried to discredit me and my testimony.

"How many friends did you have in society? Can you tell me their names?" Vijay asked me to try further to show the court that I was not very much liked by the people in society who had labeled me as a drug addict and a madman who jumped around in OSHO robes.

"I was friendly with Raju Srivastava and Kanika Ji." I replied

"Can you tell me Kanika's fat number or her surname?" Vijay probed further.

"No, she is a TV actress; I would say hello and hi to her in the park, and no, I did not visit her flat, so I don't know her flat number," I replied

"Then how can you say she was a friend?" Palande tried to stick the knife into me.

"She was Kumar Shanu's music director, the Bengali one I know," I replied

"Bullshit, you had no friends in society; people stayed away from you," Vijay said

"No, that is a lie. I kept to myself. I had no interest in society's politics, and I never attended their parties or get-togethers." By the way, it's not a crime to wear OSHO robes. I used to wear them while doing meditation, and the jumping about which you talk was when I used to do the laughing meditation in the park. I was not harming anyone." I replied

"Can you look at exhibit 11 and tell me at what distance the parking lot is from your flat room, where the French window is?" Palande threw another question

"It is about twenty feet," I replied after thinking aloud.

"Can you see this letter and tell me if you have written it?" Palande asked me.

On cue, another exhibit was thrust in front of me. This was a letter written by my dad stating that after my mother's death, flat 101/102.103 was no longer registered in my name and that I am now the flat owner.

"Yes, the letter is in my father's handwriting, but the signature is mine. He would take care of all the paperwork in the house." I replied after seeing the letter.

"How many parks are there in your society?" Vijay asked

"This is irrelevant." I can't understand your line of questioning; what are you trying to prove by this?" I replied instead, irritated.

"Just answer the question." Ujjwal Nigam got up and told me

"There was one garden inside the compound and a local park outside; you had to pay to get there.' I replied.

"Can you tell me how many rooms your flat has?" Vijay asked.

"Three bedrooms, a drawing room, three attached bathrooms, a kitchen, and a small passage from the entrance door leading to the kitchen," I replied again, asking for some time to think things through. Vijay was trying to trap them, and I had to do my best not to fumble. The more I felt, the more my testimony would be doubted by the judge, who intently listened to it and dictated it to the stenographers sitting on either side of him.

"Is it not true that your father did not like your drug habit and you used to fight with him regularly? He came to Mumbai to get you back from Mumbai.' Vijay went on the attack again.

"No, that is an utter lie and falsehood," I replied promptly.

Occasionally, I would glance at the accused, and to my surprise, was Dharanjay in the accused box. He looked old, thin, and lean. He used to be a muscular guy, and it was he who stabbed my father repeatedly, but now he sat motionless in the box wearing a Corona mask. He looked thin and wasted, wearing a crumbled shirt and loose trousers. He was hardly the man he claimed to be; he looked starved and

malnourished. Eleven years of eating the shitty jail food had taken a significant toll on his health; that much was clear to me. I was getting agitated with Vijay's irrelevant questions, and I would look outside the courtroom window to distance myself from the proceedings.

"When did your father come to Mumbai?" Vijay asked me.

"On the 5th of April," I replied.

"How did he come to Mumbai? What transportation?" Vijay asked me to press forward on his point.

"He came by flight to Mumbai," I replied

"He came suddenly because someone had complained about your drug habit; a society member had complained, and that is why he came," Vijay said he was trying to show that he was a Maratha warrior.

"No, he came to see me and the contract we signed. Me and I had a great relationship. I loved my father; he was my God. He sacrificed his life for me; otherwise, you would have also killed me." I replied with utter disgust and gave Palande a nasty stare.

"You are a good actor and a liar; all this has been told to you by the police; you are lying under oath." Palande mocked my truth and my testimony.

"No, you are lying, not me," I replied.

"You are lying, Anuj Ji; you were arrested with me; you are lying." Palande kept saying I, on the other hand, was getting very irritated at the constant cross-talk amongst the accused's lawyers.

"Can you tell me if there are video cameras at the entrance of your building?" Palande asked me

"Yes, there are at my building's entrance and the main gate, but I don't know if they are always functional," I replied

"How many gates are there in society?" Palande asked.

"There are three gates, but the entrance gate in the front is always open, and the others are closed at most times," I replied; having sold the flat a decade ago, I still could remember the compound's layout.

"Did the guard have a register to make entries for the cars that came along?" Palande asked me.

"Yes, as far as I know, but how diligently they did their work, I cannot say," I replied

"Anuj ji, can you tell me how much money you had in your bank account before your father came to Mumbai?" Palande asked.

"No, I can't; I don't remember," I replied

"OK, what bank did you have your account in?" Palande asked me.

"Oriental Bank of Commerce in Lokhandwala Market," I replied

"How much tax did you pay before 2012?" Palande asked me.

"Yes! I do, but I can't tell you how much with any accuracy." I replied, trying to remember.

I realized the point of his questioning now: he was trying to show the court that I had no money and was bankrupt. It was I who did not want to give back the five lakh deposit for which Dharanjay butchered my father. He was trying to show the court that I had no money and that it was I who benefited the most from my dad's murder, as I became a millionaire overnight. I understood that he was trying to pin the blame for my father's murder on me. He was indeed crafty, and he was showing his Maratha warrior side. "The gloves were genuinely off, and this was going to be a market-side brawl; this was a fistfight in an open court, only the fight was through the mind games that we both were playing with each other now. I had to hold my own and push back hard.

"What is this stupid line of questioning?" I turned to the judge, almost pleading with him to intervene.

"Please answer the question." The judge, S.U. Hake told me with a smile. Man, this was turning out to be a very long session. It was almost six in the evening; that was the time on the wall clock.

"Well, Dharanjay worked for Vijay Palande, aka Karan Sood. I did not trust him but let him in because he was Vijay Palande's friend. That is why I let Manoj into the flat for painting purposes." I replied. It was getting too much; the courtroom was hot, and the proceedings had stretched late into the evening. The fan on the ceiling was throwing hot air, and I had started playing with my fingers. I was clasp my hands and getting irritated and tired as both the defense lawyers began to pounce on me.

"Your brother Samit Tikku bribed the cops to get you off the hook; that is the truth; you commissioned the murder of your father, and now you blame Palande for the crime," Prashant shouted aloud, trying to intimidate me into submission.

"False, that is false and a bitter lie." I barked into the microphone, ensuring everyone heard me loud and clear. "Palande masterminded the murder; he got my father murdered. You have no proof; you can't make false allegations in court." I went on to state, making it clear to Prashant Pandey, that I would not back down or be intimidated.

"You are falsely testifying; you are acting; your statements to the police are contradictory." A lady lawyer named Advocate Fernandes got up and said, looking directly at me, She was in her thirties, dusky and plump. She gave me a flirtatious smile as she said those words; she was the counsel for Dharanjay Shinde. A cheap,

low-paid lawyer is assigned to Danny and other poor accused who can't afford a lawyer.

"No, I am stating the facts; I am stating the facts; I am stating the truth," I said with great persistence.

"You see, this cookbook's title is The Front Page Murders; Pooja Changowalia, a journalist, writes it. Did you give her an interview, Anuj Ji?" Palande got up to ask me.

"Yes, I did give her a telephone interview, but I had no prior knowledge that she was writing a book on the case," I replied, only half-stating the truth.

Chapter Four: Anuj Fights Back Toe to Toe

I duly stepped out of the witness box and sat on the wooden chair near the witness stand. Today, Nigam Sahib was smiling as I moved out of the court. Ujjwal Nigam walked up to me with a file. "Good, Anuj; the court is happy with your testimony and how you answered all the questions. But we will need to have one more session. Would you rather be back in Mumbai or go back to Dehra Doon? If you are returning, we can keep it for the end of the month; otherwise, we will keep the testimony session four days from now, on the 4th of May, and we will need you here in court for the entire day." Ujjwal told me with a smile that he was happy with my testimony, which showed on his face.

"Yes! Sir, I will stay back. I want to finish the testimony before I go. Please keep it for the 4th of May. I will be back in court then." I replied in haste. So, it was settled that we would have one more day of my testimony in court. I felt relieved and walked about the court corridors, stretching my back and legs. I went to the loos to take a leak, and Kadam also followed me to the loos.

"You should have stated that the ledge was less than one foot away and the car parking was less than ten feet away. The eyewitness saw Danny stabbing your father and Manoj holding him by his back from the French glass window. He saw your dad beating the window pane and the struggle for only six or seven seconds, then they tied a wire cord around his neck and, pulled him back into the room and took him to the bathroom. Palande asked you these tricky questions because he wanted to show the court that the distance between the parking lot and the French window was very far away, and the eyewitness could not have gotten a clear view. He wanted to smother the eyewitness testimony and create doubt in the judge's judge's mind." Kadam whispered to me as we took a leak, standing side by side.

"Ab ho gaya, sir, I replied spontaneously and estimated the distance. Now let's leave it to what's done is done." I replied to Kadam.

"The rest of my answers were okay overall; Ujjwal ji and the court are satisfied with our story and my truth about what matters," I replied, slightly irritated by Kadam's nagging.

I hastily walked out of the court with my bodyguard and sharpshooter Sooraj in tow. I was advised to get out of the building and move into the police jeep without loitering around the court corridors, and that's what I did.

"Wo kamina ab line pe a gaya, sara din apko Sir, Sir, car ke baat car raha tha theek tight kiya apne uska, sala! Baap ka saya creen liya ap ke sar se." My Jeep driver lamented aloud.

"Uska karam uske samney hei, phasi ka panda tight ho raha hei," Sooraj added his two cents after observing the day's proceedings.

" Usko Kal dose dena zaroori tha, poora din Anuj Sir Anuj sir, kar ke baat kar raha tharaha tha." I replied, carrying forward the chain of thought.

"I am very exhausted now. We should stop at some place to have snacks." Sooraj said, looking at the driver.

"Let Kadam also come; it seems the court was happy with your testimony." My driver said

Soon, the sizeable six-foot-plus frame of Gitesh Kadam approached our brown police jeep. Kadam is a tall cop with a light punch over six feet tall and a wettish brown complexion. His most striking feature is his bold and shaven head, which makes him look like Sabu from Cha Cha Chowdhry.

Novel. Yes, he was my Sabu in this fight with Vijay Palande and his bloodthirsty gang, and I was the willy and clever Cha Cha Chowdry.

""Chalo, let's move. We need to move. There's no point hanging around the court area; it's much too dangerous." Kadam said he loaded his three grey bags of files onto the back seat, then flagged his laptop on me and handed me a pen drive. Palande has submitted this to court; there are some videos of you naked that he wants the courts to see. "Kya kiya tum kya gul khilaye hei ap ne Anuj sir, Simran ke saath porn film hei tumhari kya. Simran ko basate hue shoot kiya kya Palande tum ko." Kdam asked me.

"No, no, there cannot be a video." Palande used a Blackberry mobile phone at that time.

My phone was rare; no one had video mode on their phone, at least not Vijay and me. We never got fully naked in bed. I sometimes chased her around the bedroom and once in the parking lot of Palande's flat, but that was all. She would admonish me by saying, "She did not like public shows of affection," so I kept my distance.

"Once, I was sitting by her side on the bed after she told me about her Bhajan singing and how she came to Mumbai through an Anup Jalota Bhajan singing crew; after a while, she fell asleep, then I kissed her on her shoulders and squeezed her boobs, but she would say, "Go to Anupriya Goenka, she is your true

love, not me." That was a few moments of intimacy. No, I did not get naked with Simran infection. I never even removed my shirt with her, let alone my trousers. After what the bitch did to my dad, I think I have fucked the bitch up the ass." I tried to explain to Kadam.

"Then it must have something to do with this girl, Anupriya Goenka. Anyway, we will look into this in the coming few days. We have a four-day break till the next hearing. We will take advice from Ujjwal ji. We can always say that the videos are morphed and not yours; they have morphed your images." Kadam had all his answers ready.

The Jeep speeded out of the fort area, and we stopped at the Iranian restaurant we had visited a few days ago. This time, we enjoyed cake and coffee. "'Palande is over, usko ab koi nahi poochta, khalaas ho gaya hei wo, he has no money, no one gives him any bhaav anymore, ap sahi time pe Aya apna witness dene ko," Sooraj said as we all sipped coffee together. The cops were very nice to me and treated me with love and respect; they shared my pain and sorrow that a grave injustice had been done to me.

It was almost night when we reached the Bandra crime branch office, from where Kadam dropped me in his scooter to my hotel. "It was almost night when we reached the Bandra crime branch office, from where Kadam dropped me in his scooter to my hotel. "Accha, no drinks today; I have other work, but you try to stay in the hotel room and don't go to meet any friends; if you want, call them to the hotel. Only when your testimony is through in the courts should you stay low and keep your location to yourself. I am like a brother to you, man. I want you to be safe. We will meet tomorrow and discuss the plan for the hearing on the 4th of May; till then, meditate and do some walking." Kadam dished out some brotherly advice to me.

I said good night to him and slowly shuffled off to room 207 of the Oriental Residency Hotel, which was to be my abode throughout my Mumbai stay, which had now been stretched further by a week or so.

I had a quiet dinner of prawns, paneer curry, rice, and kulfi, but I was itching to talk to someone. I wanted to share my days in Mumbai with someone. I tried to lighten my load and share my experiences in court with someone. The first name that cropped into my mind was Geoffrey, my astrologer and spiritual guide from New Zealand. "Hi! Geoffrey, How are you? I just wanted to chat. I have had a hectic two days of giving my testimony in court. It was very intense and hectic, tense and hectic indeed. Palande was trying to discredit me, picking on my drug addiction and saying that I was mentally ill and under treatment in Jodhpur Hospital, but I stood my ground. But the cross-questioning by his lawyers was a real battle." I told Geoffrey over the phone. "Hi! Geoffrey, How are you?

I just wanted to chat. I have had a hectic two days of giving my testimony in court. It was very intense and wild indeed. Palande was trying to discredit me, picking on my drug addiction and saying that I was mentally ill and under treatment in Jodhpur Hospital, but I stood my ground. But the cross-questioning by his lawyers was a real battle. I told Geoffrey over the phone. "Yes, I am sure, bro, it must have been; it's not easy to fast such a tragedy that to in an open court, I am sure old wounds would have opened up; it must hurt," Geoffrey said.

"I gave my best and took him on as I entered. I shouted aloud in open court, "You fucking swine, you swine, you murdered my father, you swine." It was dramatic. The cops and the lawyers grabbed me and pulled me out. They had to take me out into the lobby. My body was perspiring. I was that angry when I faced Palande for the first time in eleven years.

"You are a brave son; keep your chin up." I can see positive things. Just stick to your story, and don't show emotions anymore. It was your first day, and the judge would understand. But listen to the questions and then answer. I can feel positive vibes; your father is watching over you." Geoffrey reiterated

"Yes! Even though the number of my cases is 548, that's an angel number, so I have the good wishes of the gods with me. The motherfucker is guilty as hell, and my testimony will be the last nail in his coffin." I told Geoffrey, further briefing him about the day gone by.

"Yes, he will try and trick you and stigmatize you, but the evidence is on your side. Just stay calm and relaxed, but keep your focus, Anuj." Geoffrey went on to state:

"I have a few more days in Mumbai, and it will all be over. I will have paid my debt to my father, and the verdict will hopefully be at the end of next year." I explained it to my now-spiritual guide and astrologer.

"Yes, 548 is a good and positive number, and I also think the timing is good; you have sneaked in before the doors shut, and your testimony is just in the nick of time. It will tighten the grip on this very evil man. Who is so blatantly guilty of a very heinous crime?" Geoffrey tried to appease me and give me his usual encouragement. This was much needed, as I was exploding inside to talk to someone and share my court experience.

Now I had a four-day break and nothing much to do in the city except wait in my hotel room. I kept up my daily walks around Bandra and Khar. But I had the company of Kadam, who landed up the next day in the evening with a dozen fresh and juicy Hap-us mangoes from his farm in Ratnagiri. This was a special treat for me, and I am indebted to Gitesh. "You are my guest in the city, Anuj ji, and these mangoes are for you to enjoy," Kadam said as he placed the mangoes in the fridge and pulled out a cozy chair to sit on near the TV.

I waited for a while, making sure the mangoes cooled off in the fridge, and then I ordered some mocktails for the two of us, along with paneer tikka and fish fingers. "So what do you think these videos are all about?" He has also attached some news footage and newspaper clippings showing that you were arrested and taken to Cooper Hospital for a medical checkup. Tu kya kiya Simran Sood ko bajaya kya." Kadam asked me again. "No, no, you and Tawde have a one-track mind; I did not go all the way with Simran; all this fucking business is all bullshit," I told Kadam bluntly:

"Ok, no issues. It just denied it, saying it's a lie, it's false, and the news clipping is just alleging that you murdered your father. He had bitched about Karan Kakkad, saying that his family was into prostitution and Karan made a lot of money from cricket betting. I knew Karan was a showman; he would wear huge gold chains and gold rings to show off his wealth, and the BMW was also something he bought from the profits of cricket betting. Palande had also tried to accuse Karan Kakkad's brother. I know that Karan had told his brother that Bollywood is all about the show; it shows off, and it is important to disregard one's status and show that one is rich and successful in Mumbai." Kadam said he had been on this case for over two years and had seen the testimony of dozens of witnesses in both the Arun Tikku and Karan Kakkad cases. Kadam had become an old hand in both cases. He was the client servicing manager, liaising with Ujjwal Nigam, the courts, and the witnesses. He was a key player along with Ujjwal Nigam in both cases.

I sipped my mocktail and said gently, "Poor Karan." Show off mein mara gaya, an unfortunate end to a very young life; he was only twenty-eight." I said it with sorrow in my heart.

"I joined the case when only six or seven witnesses had taken both cases; today, we have more than twenty-five witness testimony in both cases; we have crossed the halfway mark. But Anuj Sir, it's not easy but mehnat laga; we had to drag people to come and take the stand; we had to plead and even threaten legal action if people did not appear to give their testimony; my whole time went into going to see the witnesses and convincing their families to do what is right." Kadam said he was more relaxed now, and the room had also cooled off along with the mangoes.

We ordered a plate full of vanilla ice cream. As Kadam cut the mangoes, I dipped them in ice cream and had two in one go. The third one I had with the peel on, I sucked out the entire juice; they were that yummy. "These are the best in the world, just for you, Anuj." Kadam papered me the whole evening.

"Come to think of it, what did Palande get in the end? He got nothing; he lost everything; he lost his car; he has spent eleven years in a high prison jail, sleeping on the floor, getting bitten by mosquitoes, eating prison food, and fighting with fellow inmates. His life is worse than hell. People give their lives for their freedom,

and this fool gave up his freedom for some money. He made a very raw deal for himself, indeed. Now, I am making money selling my books on the stories he and I created. He stands broken in a white shirt, contemplating his fate daily; it's like slow poison. He puts on a brave face in court, but in the darkness of his soul, he must be crying and cursing his fate. Jail life is horrible. My lawyer friends in Tihar have told me many horror stories. There are times when rival gangs inside jail attack and kill each other over petty squabbles. Ultimately, Vijay Palande got an empty hand, and fate dealt him a nasty blow. He fell out with the top cop bosses of the city; they used him as a Khabri and informer, but with these two murders, they disowned him too." I went on to give Kadam my insights into the case.

"He could have gone a long way with you; maybe you two could have had a hotel partnership also, but the abrupt and quick decision to murder your father was his undoing. He was like Bhasma Sura the demon, dancing away to glory, but then he kept his hand on his head and destroyed himself and his soul." Kadam added his insight and quiet views.

"Yes, Lord Vishnu gives you a long rope, a very long rope, and then suddenly he tugs at it, snapping your neck and destroying you. That's the case with Vijay; he was doing his murders, changing his identity, and getting away with it, but he kept his hand on me, and now he is finished and has been on trial for eleven years without parole." I said aloud.

Kadam and I feasted on a biryani, and then he aptly left Bacchae Ka School's admission form. Lana hei, I, ahem, work. I will see you tomorrow or maybe pass by to say hello." Saying this, this gentle giant, this loving and peaceful man, left my hotel room for the day as I pulled my pillow and tried to get some much-needed sleep.

I slept deeply through the night, but then I had a vivid, almost eerie, dark dream. I saw my father being stabbed and beaten in the French window. I got scared, but then I turned my head, and I saw my grandmother, my ninety-four-year-old grandmother, who just passed away a year or so ago. She looked pale and haggard, also shriveled and weak. She smiled at me very lovingly and opened her arms for me. Then she said, "Mein tere liye aiyin hun mein wapis a gayi hun sirf tere liye, himat maat harna mere bachhey." She said, "I have returned for you only, my son." I could see her vividly at first, and then, as a shadow, she was

wearing her green nightie and a bit hunched. Just at this point, my dream broke, and I woke up in a huff, a bit shaken but still in control of my feelings. I quickly got up and grabbed a Coke from the fridge, then washed my face and sat upright on the bed with the thoughts of my dream still swirling in my mind. It was a dark and quirky dream, and I could still see my grandmother's face looking at me with soulful and loving eyes. Maybe a message from the gods, some hope and solace for me, and a pat from my Granny7 that I am heading in the right direction. My dead grandmother had appeared in my dream, cheering me on with her lessons from the sidelines. I closed my eyes again and began to meditate and chant. It was time to go inward again.

Chapter Five: The Naked Videos

Video's After my grandmother's dream, I took a long morning walk; it was the only thing that helped me steady my mind in Mumbai. I still had to complete my testimony; there was still a day to go before the 4th of May, and after lunch, I got a call from Gitesh Kadam. "Hi, I am coming over to pick you up. You need to see the files and the videos Palande will submit to the courts. We will scan them in the office and then, before going to court, ask Ujjwal for his opinion.

I duly hopped on Kadam's scooter as we whizzed off to the crime branch office. I had become very familiar with the place; there was a wine shop opposite the station, and I often picked up a bottle of Glen Fiddich Single Malt whisky in the evening. I had gotten used to tea in paper cups and often crossed the road to get a cigarette from the Paan shop.

"Come in, Anuj sir, let's look at the videos on the pen drive. I moved along the police control room and sat down with Gates on a desktop computer as he inserted the digital pen drive and opened the folders to line up the videos. The first one was a shocker; it was a naked video of mine I had taken in the bathroom with the title **Anupriya Apni Chute ke Dam bata**. I posted these videos on my Instagram and Anupriya Goenka's love pages. The famous actress had complained to the cops, but this was an old controversy, almost two years ago when I was last in Mumbai. It was irrelevant to the case; maybe by sharing it with the court, he was trying to tell the judge that I am not a man of good moral character, but it was irrelevant to the murder case. What I realized, though, was that Palande had been stalking me at least online; he knew what I had posted two years ago, and he was also reading my travel blog, anuntikku.com. Why in hell would his lawyer ask them how many countries I have traveled to? It was clear that Vijay was still following me and would be googling my name often from his jail whenever he had access to a computer.

Kadam opened the other three videos; they were old news clips still available on YouTube. Clips from a 9-x news story on the murder. The anchor was saying that Anuj Tikku had been arrested for the murder of his father. There was also a video of my movie scene from "Killed Jessica with Rani Mukherji, where she is mouthing off the famous dialogue to me: "Tum wanha hote tho gaand phat ke haath mein

aa jati." But this, too, looked irrelevant to me. How is a movie clip important to this case? I am an actor, and I do as the director tells me, and anyway, it's just a Bollywood film.

Along with the clippings was a handwritten letter by Vijay stating that I had lied to the court on oath and that my testimony was false. There was also a newspaper clipping of mine in Copper Hospital, with my arm held by a cop. This was to suggest that I, too, had been arrested and had been taken for a medical check-up, and only when my brother Samit Tikku bribed the top cop, Deven Bharti, was I let off the hook and made a witness in the case instead of being a co-accused.

He wanted to show the letter and the videos he had submitted to the court on the 4th and cross-question me on them in open court. "Theek hai! "Not to worry, we can handle this." Kadam kept his reassuring arm around my shoulders; he gave me much-needed moral support. "Ujjwal ji, we will show it to him before we move to court. Let's move on; we have a long day today as well, and this might prove to be a difficult day," Kadam said, saying that Kadam hopped into the jeep, and I moved in through the other door. We were speeding towards the fort and the session court in no time.

"We arrived at the Residency Hotel at around eleven o'clock. Gitesh and I moved out with my sharpshooter and bodyguard, Sooraj, just behind me; he was like my shadow throughout this duel with Palande and his bloodthirsty gang. I moved into the lobby area and waited for the big man to arrive in his jeep with his Z-grade security in tow.

"Gitesh put my videos on his laptop and showed Ujjwal Nigam the naked video and the other news clippings." Just say that the naked video is morphed, and the news clipping is just alleging that I was also arrested for my dad's murder; this is all irrelevant stuff. You tell the judge you are an actor; even if you have to jump on the judge, you will do it if the director tells you. The Rani Mukherji Video is of no use. It's a film, and you are just playing a role as a character." Ujjwal gave me some advice after seeing the videos and clippings that Palande would show the court. He also went through the letter he had written. I felt relieved now; I feared the videos might distract from my testimony. Vijay was trying to show that I was an unstable person with mental issues. I had no choice but to take on these

allegations in court before the judge, and I was ready for the final battle and brawl with the defense team and its three lawyers.

We drove to these session courts and did not stop on the way. Today I was seemed to be a busy day. A dozen OB vans and scores of reporters with video cameras surrounded the court entrance. It was a big day, and I got a bit curious about the fuss, so I enquired from a policeman operating the x-ray machine, "Kyon Bhai itna reporter his liye, some big news ?" I asked the thin man wearing Khaki who looked dead bored with his job; he looked at me and then said with a facial expression. .' It is considerable judgment the court is going to announce a judgment on a decade-old case. There will be a judgment on the Jiya Kahn and Sooraj Pancholi case. Pancholi was charged with the abutment of his girlfriend's suicide, you know that actress Jiya who acted in that Ram Gopal Verma film ." the cop then paused for a bit.

So it was the Jiya Khan suicide case; this was a big scandal in Bollywood, too, played out like a soap opera on TV. I sat in a waiting room on the second floor as Ujjwal talked to some of his old clients. The court had a buzz about it today, maybe anticipating a significant verdict. I just sat on a wooden bench contemplating the day when I was tapped on the shoulder. "Hello! I am **Malini Sharma**. I am a crime reporter for **DNA**. I covered your dad's murder case. You must be the son of Anuj Tikku?" A short but sporty young lady began to converse with me.

'Yes, I have been in Mumbai for a week already, given two full days of testimony, and I will leave for my town, Dehra Doon, after the testimony is complete and I have satisfied the court with my truth." I told Malini, who shook my hand and wished me luck. "I will be hanging around; maybe we can chat later. I am also covering the verdict today; there will be a lot of scandal today in court." Malini smiled and winked at me.

Then I saw Kadam approach the waiting room; he walked up to me as Malini left us, still waving her hand as if wishing me all the luck.' What the hell, Anuj Ji? There is no talking to the press. No one should know you are in Mumbai. It would help if you focused on the job at hand. These perks people are like termites looking for pieces of wood to stick onto. Just ignore the press. We have to get the conviction first." Gitesh told me as if he was tutoring me. I knew I had to focus

and took some deep breaths. Soon, we were walking to the courtroom entrance area. One case was still being heard, and I realized we would have to wait. I could see Palande in his white shirt as he gently sat on the front bench. He was busily taking out documents for his bag as he and Nigam chatted with each other.

Some cases were going on where a sheik man had caused bodily harm to a victim with his kirpan. As the lawyer gave her final statement to the judge, a burly Sikh man stood upright; to me, he looked like a defense lawyer. It took time for this case to get over, and awe slowly moved in. As the judge arrived, Tawde and Sooraj again took their seats amongst the seated audience. There was a whole house today. Dharanjay Shinde sat in the accused box, shrunken and hollow with his corona mask. He was half the size he used to be, and I was sure he was not being fed well. The judge arrived, and as if on cue, I moved into the witness box and did a mike test.

I took my oath as I had previously and then prepared for the proceedings. Vijay Palande got up and handed a letter and a pen drive to the clerk, who passed them on to the judge." I took my oath as I had previously and then prepared for the proceedings. Vijay Palande got up and handed a letter and a pen drive to the clerk, who passed them on to the judge. "Sir, I want to show the court some videos of Anuj Tikku with your permission and a letter to state that Anuj has lied under oath in court." Saying that, he sat down again.

The clerk handed the pen drive to Kadam, who inserted it into a court laptop and then passed it to the judge, who started to go through the videos. The judge looked amused more than anything. "Can you explain the videos to the court?" He showed the screen of the laptop to the open court. My naked video in a bathroom was something.

"Yes, your honor, this is not my video; it is doctored and morphed. Somebody has taken my image and morphed it. This is a doctored video. The other video with me speaking dialogue is a rehearsal video I was preparing for a role audition, in which I am playing a man who molested a little girl who is his niece." I exploded at the judge, who was constantly making notes and dictating my testimony to the two stenographers sitting on either side. The proceedings were well and truly underway.

"So, Anuj Ji, is it not true that you were arrested with me in Chiplun and brought back to Oshiwara Police Station by Unit Eight of the Bandra Crime Branch Police?" This newspaper clipping shows you being held by Inspector Matre at Cooper Hospital." Vijay threw open his first salvo of the afternoon.

"No, that is false." I came on a private bus from Chiplun to Oshiwara Andheri; the photograph you show is mine and Inspector Matre's, but I had only asked the police to take me to the hospital as I was in a state of shock and suffering; my head was spinning, and my entire left side of the body had been paralyzed by the shock of my father's death." I lamented as I animatedly pleaded to the judge. I knew that I would have to be at the top of my game here and needed all my acting skills to come to the fore. I pointed to my left arm again and again. I bet my body forward to show how my shoulders had slumped and how my left hand had become twisted due to the shock and spasms my body had suffered." In the hospital, I was given painkillers along with headache tablets to ease my pain. I was in terrible shape and exhausted. You can see my hair; it is disheveled. I was in so much pain and suffering at that time." I went on to state it animatedly.

"You are a damn good actor, for sure." It was the turn of the grey-haired Atul Pandey to confront me now.

"You traveled to fifty countries after your father's death; everything he owned became yours. You benefited the most from your father's death and murder." Atul Pandey said this with disdain towards me.

"The Mumbai flat was already mine; I had enough money," I replied, rebuking the allegations.

"What about the news clippings? They say you were arrested for the murder of your father." Palande now intervened.

"The stories say alleged; they are allegations, and news media stories are not excepted in a court of law." I have read a lot on the net about this issue.

"He is lying. The lady Anupriya Goenka had registered a complaint against him with the police, and an FIR was lodged against him. He was arrested for the

matter of circulating his naked video and shaming a lady." Palande said he was almost going hyper; he was losing his cool now. At this point, all three defense lawyers pounced on me.

"It was you who got your father killed; you gave Dharanjay a supari to murder your father." Prashant Pandey got up and waved his hands in the air animatedly.

"No, that is a lie, back lie, that is false," I repeated.

This was an all-out attack on my character and my truth. The pack of four was now trying to overpower me as I stood alone in the witness box. In this moment of tension and submission, I looked at Gitesh Kadam, who gave me a thumbs up. That gesture gave me more resolve, and I felt protected. I then looked at Sooraj, who reassured me and raised his hand to calm me down. He then moved his hands towards his trousers and showed me his handgun as if to reassure me that he was covering me in case of any physical attack by any gangster in court. Then, I looked at Ujjwal Nigam for the last time, who looked tame and smiled. I knew I had these men by my side and that the law and its people would protect me in an open court against a pack of gloves and hyenas who were pulling at my soul with disdain, wanting nothing more than to rip my flesh apart and drink my blood.

"No, no, that is a lie; it's you who murdered my father with sixteen stab wounds; you brutally killed him, Vijay Palande.' I shouted, almost soaking and croaking in pain. This was too much of an emotional experience, as the thoughts of the pain my dad would have suffered came back to me, and I felt a numbing sensation in my feet. Their sheer needle pricks in my body, and I felt my legs go loose and weak. I held the witness box with my hands from either side just so that I would not fall off in pain and due to numbness in my body.

"You were a nuisance to the Samarth Angaan society; the society was fed up with you, and your father had come to take you back, which is why you got him killed." Prashant Pandey, the defense lawyer, went to my Jaguar.

"That is not true; it's false," I said. I was sticking to my guns and taking on one salvo after another from the defense lawyers and their entire team. I turned to Ujjwal; he gave high fives to Srikant Tawde, who sat on the second row just

behind him. I had to look for comfort in the cops and the lawyers to get a sign from them that I was on the right track.

The wall clock ticked away, and the courtroom again fell silent. All that could be heard was the clicking of the two female stenographers and some idea gossip of the court clerks.

"Please state your name, age, and qualifications again to the court for the record." The judge, S.C. Hake, asked me S.U. Hake was the third additional judge on the case after Judge Gandhi and S.M. Menjoge.

"Anuj Tikku's father is Arun Kumar Tikku; my mother is Rekha Tikku; my age is 48; and my qualifications are BSc. "I have an engineering degree from the University of Manchester and an MBA from IMT Ghaziabad." I sat in the court.

"What stream was your MBA in?" Hake asked me to give all the correct details as if wanting to emote.

"Human Resource and Marketing, sir," I replied crisply after gaining my composure.

"When did you give your first statement to the police?" Atul Pandey asked me

"I gave them on the 9th and 10th and on April 11th, respectively," I answered with a quiet assurance.

"To be noted, Lord Anuj has falsified; he gave no testimony on April 9th; it was the 10th and 11th that he gave his statement to the police." Prashant Pandey handed a copy of the statement to the judge, who read it carefully.

I felt a blow to my gut. I had fumbled and made a mistake. The pressure from the three defense lawyers made me make a mistake, and the judge noted that objection. Suddenly, the defense lawyers felt vindicated, and all three of them smiled and looked at each other with an I told you so smile, saying that their attack strategy had worked and that I had made a mistake, which the court, too, had acknowledged. The pressure had gotten to me for me to fumble, but that was it. That was my only mistake during the three days of giving my testimony on oath to the session court.

"You have lied to the court. You were arrested in Chiplun; even your fingerprints were taken. It was only with the blessings of the senior police officers in the crime branch, Himanshu Roy and Deven Bharti, that you were let off the hook and not made an accused but a witness in this case. You have lied to the court in your testimony." Vijay Palande said this would be his last chance to state his truth and have the court here. Time was running out for him; it was evening time now, and my testimony would be over by the end of the session. So they went full gusto on me, trying to tarnish my reputation and put the blame for my father's tragic murder on my head. I once again stood my ground and flatly denied his truth.

"No, that is a lie; no fingerprints were taken," I replied.

"You are just acting; you are a damn good actor." Atul Pande got up and said it with a dry smirk.

"Your statements are contradictory and not the whole truth." Prashant Pandey jumped in.

The courtroom fell silent again for a while. I opted for the bottle of mineral water and took three deep swigs of it. My throat was parched, and I needed to get some air into my system. I try to twist my hands and knock my figures; the stress has made my hands tense and sweaty. I wanted to relax; it had been a lengthy testimony, and I had to listen intently before answering each question.

The judge made his notes, and the stenographer typed out my statement in court on ten sheets of paper, which Kadam brought to me to sign. It's finally over; my oral testimony to the court has been delivered. I soon exited the witness stand and moved out of the courtroom. I went straight for the loo at the end of the corridor to relieve myself, and Kadam followed me as usual.

"Arrey fucker, what did you say on April 9th when you stated Inspector Roopwate on April 10th and 11th? You made the wrong statement. You made a mistake, man." Kadam asked me as he, too, started to pee beside me.

"Shit man, I just got nervous. All the defense lawyers ganged up on me. They were asking questions one after the other. I just got confused. That's why there's an error, but it's ok. No one is perfect. The judge had already said he liked my testimony, but it would not matter much." I replied, trying my best to salvage the situation.

"Chalo!" Go out and get in the Jeep; Sooraj will escort you." Kadam gave me his instructions. I walked out of the busy courtroom corridor of lawyers and criminals through the TADA court, where Sanjay Dutt was convicted, onto an old lift, which I took to the ground floor.

'Anuj Bhai, don't waste time outside; get into the car." Sooraj said, and both of us rushed towards the car. We also had to wait for guests to come out with the statement copies.

I saw Ujjwal walk into his Jeep with full command cover. He passed our Jeep and then pulled down his window. "Why did you say the 9th of April? You made an error. "Nonetheless, it's OK; I will manage." Saying that, he waved to them and moved forward in his white Jeep.

Our brown Gipsy pushed forward and took a sharp left turn onto the open Fort Road. I could now hear the evening traffic again as the sun set behind me. I was the sanctuary of my police escorts. I was safe and alive. That was all that I ever wanted.

I knew today was the last day, as I had already booked my tickets out of the city two days later.

We took the sea link back to the Bandra office, and in between, I caught a glimpse of Mukesh Ambani's daughter's lavish bungalow. It was a treat for the eyes.

"Yeh! Ambani ki beti ka ghar hei, sala, the rich have it all," Sooraj said, looking at the lush house.

"Yes! We can only look at it and dream." I replied.

"Sala tu bada controversial hei! Naked video kam bhasuri nahi kiya aap ne life mein." As if scolding me, Kadam said that with all the whisky I had treated him to, we had now become good friends, and his presence was soothing in court. The cops looked after me well and treated me with kindness and sympathy, for which I felt a deep sense of gratitude in my heart.

I peered out my Jeep window, watching the passers-by, looking at the hoardings, and admiring some high-street shops. I felt lighter and more at ease as I knew my time in this court case was done.

"We will call you when the final verdict is delivered. We have news media also there, and Ujjwal Ji will read out the verdict." Kadam reminded me that it was not over until the final verdict. "He will then move to the high court, and his lawyers will file a petition, then to the supreme court, and finally the president will have to sign his death warrant himself," Kadam said she was acquainting me with Indian law.

Chapter six: Anand Satyawan Shedge Ka Satya

"I have been in service since 1998 with the police as a wireless controller. I was the wireless controller in 2012, and my duty was to transfer the calls to the police station. There are five police zones in Mumbai, and I have to transfer these calls for help to the right station." Anand Satyawar said that while he took the stand to testify, he was the first witness to take the stand. He gave his testimony in November 2017, when the first witness was called in the Arun Tikku murder case. Anand Satyawar was 42 years old and a wireless operator when he got the first SOS call about two men quarreling in flat 3A, Samarth Angan Building Society. "I got the call at 12:08 pm. I was on duty on April 7 in the control room from 8:00 pm to 9:00 am on April 8. I immediately transferred the dial 100 call to the designated officer." Anand, a thin and shot man, explained to the judge.

"I passed the call to a marshal on duty at the Oshiwara Police Station and informed him of a quarrel; the marshal went to the building to investigate at 12:10 pm. He was then shown Exhibit No. 154, the call record sheet for the day. "I passed the call to a marshal on duty at the Oshiwara Police Station and informed him of a quarrel; the marshal went to the building to investigate at 12:10 pm." He was then shown Exhibit No. 154, the call record sheets for the day. "Yes, this has been signed by me, and this is the call record sheet that shows that I received the SOS call." Anand pointed to the file with the exhibit inside it.

"Did you give any certificate or letter to the IO to say that this was truly the call record of the night?" Atul Pandey got up to cross the wireless operator, who looked at him perplexedly.

"Yes, I gave a letter to the IO Inspector Kamte and certified that I received the call, which was then forwarded to the beat Marshall. Once a call is received, it gets forwarded to all the police stations in all the five zones of Mumbai." Anand explained he was an old hand and had been doing his job diligently for decades.

"That will be all." Atul Pandey sat down and took his chair.

This time, the judge was J. L. Gandhi, overseeing the proceedings; he was the judge throughout the initial phase of the trial.

The second witness was **Sandesh Dilip Gaonkar**. As a sales tax inspector, he took the stand.

"I was on duty at the wireless operation on April 7 and got a call at 11:57 pm on April 7. I was the call taker. I got the call from a mobile number: 9867199367. The caller said that he was speaking from flat 3A in the Samarth Angan building from the supervisor's mobile phone and that he had seen one person beating an older man and that blood was coming out of his body. He said they had confined the older man in the room and locked the door. "Sandesh exploded in court, after which he was shown exhibit 155, the call report that shows the incoming call from the stated mobile number. "I was on duty at the wireless operation on April 7 and got a call at 11:57 pm on April 7. I was call taker two." I got the call from a mobile number: 9867199367. The caller said that he was speaking from flat 3A Samarth Angan building from the supervisor's mobile phone and that he had seen one person beating an older man, and blood was coming out of his body. He said they had confined the older man in the roo3A and locked the door. Sandesh exploded in court, after which he was shown exhibit 155, the call report that showed that the incoming call was from the stated mobile number. "Yes, that is the call report and my letter stating it." Sandesh acknowledged this to the court.

"You are lying; you have been told to say this by your senior officers in the police." Atul Pandey got up and tried to intimate the witness.

"No, that is false." I received the call on the 100 number; the report is a fact and testimony of that.' Sandesh stuck to his statement and was relieved from the witness stand. The court was going one step at a time from the incident being reported itself.

Mrs. Salim Karima Umani was the 44-year-old branch manager at Axis Bank, where Vijay Palande and Simran Sood had a joint bank locker. Since I was a branch manager at the Axis Bank Spring Fields branch, I have also been looking after business development and customer service. If a customer wants to open a locker in our bank, he must first have a savings account and apply to us for a locker. After the application is approved, we make the customer sign a ledger and paste his photographs. Then, we hand over the keys to the customer. That is the entire process." Mrs. Umani gave a crisp statement in court.

"Every time the customer uses the locker, he has to make an entry into the ledger and sing along with the date." Mrs. Karima Umani went on to state:

Then, the clerk at the court showed her exhibit No. 174 and asked her to point toward the accused. "Yes! This is the application form. I know both Karan Sood and Simran Sood; they operate locker number 162 in our bank." Mrs. Umani pointed towards the accused and identified them.

The locker application was made on March 3, 2012, and the signatures in the form were those of Karan Sood and Simran Sood, who were lodged by the witness in her testimony.

"On 8/5/2012, I got a request letter from the crime branch saying that they wanted to open Karan Sood and Simran Sood's bank lockers and that Karan had told them he had lost the key. So, I requested Godrej Boys and Co. send a technician to break open the locker. Mrs. Karima went on to spin her yarn.

She was an essential witness as she oversaw the breaking of the bank locker where my suicide note was first discovered, which went on to become the main clue and pointed towards Palande's guilt in the conspiracy to dig and hang me, making it out to be a suicide.

Swaroop Vishwantharo Bhalepatil was all but 45 years old. A short and plump man with a large girth, he had a bolding plate and a mop of thin hair turning grey from his sideburns.

"I have an MBBS in forensic medicine and have been employed as a medical officer at The Cooper Postmortem Postmortem Centre since 2011. To date, I have conducted 500 postmortems postmortems. I was on duty until 8:00 am. At 6:45 am on April 8, the dead body of Sri Arun Kumar Tikku was brought to the hospital. It was PSI Padalakar who bought the body. I started the postmortem at 2:00 pm on April 8 and finished it by 3:30 pm on the same day." The forensic doctor, Swaroop, told the story in open court.

"There was Rigour Mortis everywhere in the body; it was dead to me. The eyes were closed, but the toughness was in the oral cavity, where the pupils were dilated. There are many external injuries. Incised wounds form a wedge shape over the right chest. A 6-by-2-inch wedge shape wounds the chest at the 3 o'clock

position. Stabbing the size 3*1*2 at the 5 "O" clock position at the right nipple Incised wound size 2*1*1/2 CM below and medial to injury No. 2 Stab wound size 3*1 over the right hypochondria involving the right liver." The forensic doctor went to describe in detail each stab and where the knife had penetrated the older man.

Overall, there were 22 stab wounds inflicted on my dad, Arun Kumar Tikku, from the shoulder to the chest to the stomach and even to his liver. Dharanjay Shinde had butchered him in an alcohol-induced rage. Swaroop described each of the wounds through the photographic exhibits in court in front of the judge, who was quietly making notes.

"There are multiple lacerations on the face and neck; this must be due to the brawl. The older man fought hard to save himself, but alas, he fell to his injuries, many of them sustained by his liver and other vital body organs. These are stab wounds." Swaroop stated that he was pointing at the pictures and documents before him.

"There was food in the stomach, which shows that Mr. Tikku finished his dinner before the incident occurred." The forensic doctor clarified

"I made the postmortem report in my handwriting, and today, I have brought the original documents in court. Swaroop finished his testimony and stepped down from the witness box.

Shripal Gopinath Jadhav was now aged 66 and had retired from MTNL.

"Your honor, I have served in MTNL from 1980 to 2016 and am now retired. I was deputy manager in 2012. I used to fix new telephone connections. The customer had to record a request to get a new connection. The customer form has the customer's name, address, and telephone number, after which a work order is passed. After that, I would instruct lineman A. Yadav to install the connection. "Shripal Yadav was the MTNL man to whom Vijay Palande had requested to install a phone in my flat, which he said was required by the Spanish Consulate, Lady Navis Legenza.

The court clerk showed him exhibit 223, the order cop that instructed him to give the phone connection. Shrill nodded and acknowledged the exhibit and the documents it contained.

"MTNL has divided Mumbai into six zones, each with a Deputy Manager as its head. I was given a letter by the police to obtain the work order to install a phone in flat 3A at Samarth Angan Society." Shrill went on with his statement.

It was clear the prosecution had to prove a conspiracy that Vijay Palande wanted to take over my flat, and that's why he got the telephone connection installed. The suicide note in the locker of the Axis Bank, the photographs of my financial documents, and my father's letter detailing my finances on his Blackberry mobile pointed towards Palande's guilt. The prosecution had to get as much proof, and as many witnesses as possible, that would amount to enough circumstantial evidence to prove Vijay Palande's guilt. But all this had to convince the judge beyond a rescindable doubt.

Enter **Harangad Singh Maini**, the 37-year-old businessman who was the actual complainant and the key eyewitness who saw my dad being stabbed as the curtain of my French window fell on the floor. It was now his turn to take the witness stand as he saw the assailants attack my father.

"I am a director in a private security service firm called Agiled Security Services; we provide private security to banks and malls. On the 7th of April, at around 11:45 p.m., I was going to get medicine for my father. I went towards my car, which was in the parking lot. While opening my car door, I looked towards the window of Samarth Angan's flat 101/102/103 on the 1st floor of the 3 A building. One person had caught a man from behind, and the other was stabbing him. The victim looked old, 63 to 64 years old. I took the security guard, Suresh Lakhani Gupta, and told him what I had seen. Then, with three security guards, both of us ran up to the 1st floor flat and rang the bell. One man opened the door; he was topless and wearing blue jeans. He was the same man I saw stabbing the elderly gentleman; he had blood stains on his chest and stomach. I asked him what was happening, and he said they argued, but now it has been sorted out. I went into the room and saw another man under the quilt. There were blood stains on his feet and also on the floor. I was sure something was wrong, so I asked them where the older man was. They said he was sleeping in the other room. I asked

them who they were and who the flat belonged to; they said they were paying guests and had paid Rs 30,000 as a deposit and that one Anuj Tikku owned the flat. The man holding Mr. Arun Kumar Tikku from behind is in court today." This was when Maini pointed at Manoj Gajakosh, sitting on the witness stand.

"When I moved towards the bathroom door to open it, they pushed us out of the house and closed it. I was very suspicious and took the supervisor's phone and dialed 100. In 15 minutes, the police arrived. The police rang the bell, but no one answered, so they broke the door, and the police and I entered the house. But we did not find the two men in the bathroom of the right bedroom bathroom; we found the dead body of the old man; he had been stabbed 6 to 7 times, and there was a computer wire chord attached to his neck; it was obvious he was also strangled." Harangad Singh Maini testified on that fateful day as clearly as it had happened ten years ago.

"I can point out the assailant who was stabbing the old man." Saying this, Maini posted at the second accused, Dharanjay Shinde. The clerk handed him a copy of the FIR he had filed, and he acknowledged the document.

"I was called to the Arthur Road jail for an identification parade, where I identified both the assailants from two rows of seven people each. One tehsildar and two panch witnesses were there as well." Maini went on with his statement.

"I had mentioned the word stabbing in my FIR that one man was stabbing the old man, and he was the one who opened the door; that fact has also not been mentioned; the word stabbing is significant." Maini brought this point to the court's attention. He looked tired and jaded and had traveled from far away to give his testimony. Soon, he was relieved and asked to go after giving his deposition.

"Can you say with assurance that you could have seen the murder from the parking lot? What is the distance from where your car was parked to the French window of the flat? Prashant Pandey got up to do the cross.

"The window was clear; it was not tinted but opaque. The car parking lot is around fourteen feet from the 101, 102, and 103 flat windows. It is not true to say

that the window was opaque." Maini replied, jogging his mind, "It's been a decade.

"Did the police make a drawing of the suspected assailants? Prashant Pandey threw another volley.

"No, they did not." Came the reply from Maini.

The next witness to give his deposition was security guard **Suresh Lakhan Gupta**.

"I am educated till the tenth standard and have worked in the Samarth Angan Building as a security guard from 2011 to 2013. Alpha Net Security Company hired me. I was on duty at the 3A wing of Samartha Angan at 11:35 when Mr. Maini approached me at my post and hurriedly took me to the first floor. We rang the bell, and one topless man opened the door. There was blood on his chest. When we asked him what had happened, he said it was only red. When we asked where the older man was, they said he was sleeping in the other bedroom as their quarrel had ended. I saw another man lying under the quilt, but his feet were out, and there was blood on his feet. When we asked them to show us where the older man was, they begged us to leave, saying that the quarrel was over and they might lose their jobs. They pushed me and Maini Ji out of the flat when we insisted and bolted the room. I asked the security guards to stand by the door as Maini dialed 100 to the police control room." Suresh Lakhan Gupta said he kept taking sips of water from the water bottle as he stated his truth to the court.

"Sir Maini made the SOS call at the 100 number from my mobile number, 986719967. The police arrived in fifteen minutes. They broke the flat door. I, along with Maini Ji, entered the flat. We searched all the bedrooms, but we could not find the assailants. "I opened the bathroom door and found an old man lying in a pool of blood with stab wounds to the stomach and chest. There was a wire cord attached to his neck, and a knife was lying on the floor by his side." Suresh Lakhan's voice shivered as he narrated the gory tale.

Suresh then went on to identify the two assailants as Dharanjay and Manoj, who were sitting in the accused box. He pointed directly at the assailants. "The police had asked me to come for an identification parade at the Arthur Road Jail on the 6th of May 2012. I was asked to wait with Mr. Maini and Kishore, who were also

there. The IO inspector, Kamte, asked me to identify the two assailants from two rows of seven people each. I identified Dharanjay Shinde as the man who opened the door and had blood on his bare chest and the other assailant as Manoj Gajakosh, who was lying under the bedsheets and had a blood stain on his legs. I have already identified them in court.

"The other three guards who were with us when the incident occurred were Kishore Sahu, Kamlesh Sahu, and Lalit Kumar; they were also at the identification parade. I do not remember the name of the policeman who opened the door. It is false to say that the police have asked me to give false and wrong testimony. I, however, did not know that any painting and renovation work was going on in flat 101/102/103." Suresh continued his testimony; the defense team occasionally would do a cross or object.

"How long does it take to reach Oshiwara Police Station from Samartha Angan? Atul Pandey asked Suresh.

"It will take around 15 minutes," Suresh replied

"How many medical stores and banks are there near Samartha Angan?" Atul Pandey went on with his cross.

"I think there are about five pharmacies and three medical stores near the building," Suresh replied.

"Why did you not blow the whistle when the incident occurred?" Atul Pandey dug into the witness.

"I am a supervisor." I do not carry a whistle." Suresh replied instantly.

The next witness was **Neha Santosh Parab**, aged 56. She was the sub-registrar in Mumbai who registered the leave and license agreement between Anuj and Nevis Ligensa, the lady who worked for the Spanish Consulate. It was her turn to give her testimony, as she had registered the document.

"I am a sub-registrar and registered the live and license agreements. We require the signatures of witnesses along with their photographs. The period was two

years, from 31/3/2012 to 01/04/2014, and we met Nevis Ligensa at our office and took her photographs. We also took photographs of Dharanjay Shinde and Rafiq Shaikh, the two witnesses of the agreement. Today, I have brought a copy of the leave and license agreement." She gave the agreement to the court clerk, who passed it to the judge.

She also showed the entry of the registered agreement on her register. "The two parties had paid Rs 4000 as stamp duty to write the deal.

"How do I calculate stamp duty for a leave and license agreement? Now Atul Pandey got up for his cross.

"It is calculated depending on the flat area; this was a leave license agreement and not a sales deed; we charged Rs 4000 as stamp duty that the two parties duly paid. We also took thumb impressions of both parties, and Anuj Tikku paid the stamp duty." Neha rattled off her testimony.

"I had also taken a PIO (person of Indian origin) card from Nevis Ligensa," Neha added to her testimony.

The next witness was also an important one: Ankit **Parvin Kumar Bhayani**, aged 32, who was the front desk officer at the Axis Bank Springfield branch.

"I was posted in the Spring Field branch from 2008 to 2014, and I was also in charge of the locker, and I was the one who used to deal with locker operation and procedure." Shrimati Salima Umani was my branch manager. My branch head informed me that she had received a request from the crime branch that locker 162 had to be broken and opened since the owner had lost the keys. The locker was in the names of Karan Sood and Simran Sood, and the police wanted to search the locker, I was told. I know Karan Sood and Simran Sood; they had a priority savings account in our branch." Saying this, Ankit identified the two accused and pointed towards Simran and Vijay Palande.

"On 9/5/2012, Mr. Raut, a Godrej and Boys company technician, came to help us open the locker. Karan Sood was also there, as was Inspector Satardekar. Karan Sood had signed the form and agreed that the police could search it as he had lost the keys. I also prepared a slip of Rs 5000 in favor of Godrej as payment for

opening up the locker." Ankit explained. Ankit was then shown Exhibit 196, and she pointed to Karan Sood's signature.

Chapter Seven: Mera Yaar Jaanisar

Jaanisaar Lone, aged 37, was a true friend of mine and a crucial case witness, as he was the one who introduced me to Simran Sood. Jaanisar was a Muslim from Kashmir and had come to Bollywood to make it as a music director. He had given music for B-grad films but had yet to achieve any definitive success. He worked as a music arranger in several studios in the Andheri area, and it was in one of these studios that I first met Simran Sood. It so happened that I had written a few poems for the love of my life, Anupriya Goenka, and wanted to convert the lyrics into a song. Jaanisar's wife was a singer, and I requested both to make a jingle out of my poems.

I had paid Jaanisar thirty thousand to make the song, and I joined him and his wife to sing the lyrics and create a fascinating jingle out of the sonnets I had written for Anupriya Goenka. Simran was also making a music album, and Jaanisar was the music arranger for her album.

Now, it was Nisaarul Bashir Lone's turn to take the stand. A Salish, fair man with Pathan looks, Jaanisar had long, wavy hair and looked like a Sufi sage. He was a good friend and would often visit me in my house, to the utter horror of my grandmother in Dehra Doon, who hated Muslims and had even warned me many times not to let any Muslim man inside my home. But I am a very liberal and secular guy and became friendly with him even though he was a Kashmiri Muslim. I was a Kashmiri Pandit, and our community has been butchered by Kashmiri Muslims time and again, and we have suffered a lot in Kashmir. It was time for Jaanisar to speak his truth in court today.

"I know Anuj Tikku well; he is an actor and has worked in many films. I also know Simran Sood; Raju Kariya introduced me to Simran Sood. I composed one song for her, and she agreed to pay me Rs 30,000 for composing the song. I had recorded the song in a studio named "Idea Craft." I was the one who introduced Anuj Tikku to Simran Sood at the studio." Nisaarul Bashir wore a Pathan suit and had a bandana around his head as he spoke his truth fearlessly.

"Simran Sood only paid me Rs 40,000 and did not pay the balance of Rs 20,000. When I demanded my money from her, she threatened that she would tell her brother, Karan Sood, and I would suffer the consequences. I have no degree or

diploma, but I am a member of the Indian Performing Arts Association and the Composers Association of India." Bashir Lone stated that the stenographers were recording his testimony in court.

"Is the amount of Rs 40,00 you took from Simran Sood reflected in any bank statement of your income tax return?" Atul Pandey got up to do the cross this time around.

"I pay income tax every year, but I don't know if the amount of Rs 40,000 will reflect in any bank statement," Jaanisar explained.

"Do you have any documents to prove that transaction?" Prashant Pandey got up and asked in an exasperated manner.

"No, but I can check with the studio records." Bashir threw a curved ball at the defense lawyers.

"Threatening is a big offense. Did you register a police complaint about the threats Simon Sood gave?" Atul Pandey, the defense lawyer, asked

"No, threatening is a big offense, but I did not take the matter to the police." Bashir gave his reply promptly.

"I was present in Mumbai from the 9th to the 10th of April. It is false to say I am giving false testimony under police pressure. I do not want any publicity from this case. It is incorrect to say that I did not have any transaction with Simran Sood." Jaanisar explained with poise and grace.

"Did you send Simran Sood any notice in writing or mail to recover the balance of Rs 20,000?" Prashant Pandey got up to ask his probing questions.

"No, I sent her a message. I have not shared the message with the police. I was asked to give my statement on Anuj Tikku, whom I knew well," Bashir replied confidently.

"The accused Simran, the accused no. 4, was introduced to Anuj Tikku by me, and therefore, I was asked to give my statement, which I duly gave to the police." Bashir made it aptly clear to the court.

"I learned about the arrest of Simran Sood through the news media and television. I am not a struggling composer making false statements for publicity and fame. "I am making this statement of my own free will." Bashir roared in open court.

The typewriters in the court clicked away as one witness after another in the Arun Tikku murder case took the stand to give their sworn witness testimony. The pace of the case had suddenly picked up after the entry of Gitesh Kadam and Srikant Tawde, who were under incredible pressure to get all the witnesses to give their side of the story. Suddenly, the case picked up speed.

Daya Bahi Khemji Bhai Patel was 56 years old and was one of the paanch witnesses the police used while searching Karan Sood at Vijay Palande's flat in Oberoi Springs. He was a short man with a hunch; he took the stand wearing a kurta pajama and Kolhapuri slippers.

"I am educated till the seventh standard, and on April 11, 2012, I was proceeding towards Oshiwara Police Station when a Hawaldar called me to help as a witness. I agreed to help the police. I met Inspector Patil, who told me that a murder-accused flat was being searched, and I had to be present as a witness. One Chandrabhan was also present with me as a paanch witness. The accused, Vijay Palande, is present in court." Saying this, he pointed at Vijay Plane as soon as the police removed his black veil in court.

"We then went to the seventh floor of the Oberoi Springs apartment and rang the bell. A lady by the name of Simran opened the door. We gave her the search warrant and asked if we wanted to search the flat. She was not willing to explore and tore the search papers. We, along with the police, entered anyway and searched the cupboards and drawers of the flat. We found one passport in the drawer with the accused's photo and name, Vijay Palande. We also found an agreement with the name and signature of Anuj Tikku.

"Simran told us that Vijay Palande is her "moot bola bhai." There was a copy of Anuj Tikku's ID card as well. We seized all the documents and did a paanchnama.

The court clerk bought exhibits 328, BX, and CX and showed them to Daya Bahi, who identified them in open court by pointing at the exhibits.

"I used to work for a dairy shop in 2012 and was paid six thousand rupees as my salary. Vijay Palande had also threatened me, and in fear, I had left Mumbai for a while. I had complained to the police about these threats as well.

"Can you tell me how many windows are in the Oberoi Springs flat?" Prashant Pandey got up to do a cross.

"I did not go there to count windows." Daya Bahi was getting instead irritated at the irrelevant question the defense team lawyers threw at him.

"This is not your true statement; you are giving this statement under police pressure." Pandey got up and waved his sword. There was some sober rattling between the witness and the defense lawyers.

"No, I am under top pressure; this is my turn to make a statement in court." Saying this, Daya Bhai Patel got off the witness stand.

Vikas Bala Sahib Patil, it was true of this tall and thin man's man to take the stand; he was 44 years old, and the police had asked him to give his witness and testimony as well.

"I have known police officer Amol Deshpande for the last ten years, in August 2011. Amol Deshpande was attached to crime branch unit eight, and I was also connected to the same unit. Bhagwan Patil is my unclean. Amol Deshpande was the owner of a motorcycle bearing the number MH-03-AG-9550. Vikas spoke clearly into the microphone on the left side of the witness box.

"In August 2011, Amol wanted to sell the bike. My uncle Bhagwan liked the bike and bought it for Rs 21,000, and then Amol Deshpande handed over the RC book, Form No. 35, and NOC. My uncle Bhagwan then handed over the documents to me and asked me to get the documents transferred to his name. I handed the documents to Yogesh to transfer them into my uncle Bhagwan Patil's name. I

constantly followed up with Yogesh as he did not do the transfer, and then he told me that he had lost the papers. My uncle said he would not take the motorbike until it was legally transferred to his name." Vikas Bala paused to catch his breath and sipped a glass of water.

"Then Amole Deshpande said Dharanjay Shinde liked and would require the bike. Dharanjay is a friend of the accused, Vijay Palande, a relative of PI Sanjay Shinde, working for Unit Eight Crime Branch. I was present when Dharanjay Shinde gave Rs 20,000 to my uncle Bhagwan and took the bike from him.

The court clerk brought the ROC and bike documents for Vikas to identify them as exhibits AW and AT. Vikas pointed at the exhibits and said that they were true and correct.

"It is true that on the 6th of April 2012, Amol Deshpande handed the Xylem vehicle to accused No. 1, Vijay Palande, as per the directions of our superior officers. I don't know whether the vehicle was handed to Vijay Palande for some secret police operation. "There was no departmental inquiry initiated against me." Vikas went further to state objection, you are lying, and the superior officers have asked you to say all this." Atul Pandey got up and raised his fists in the air. "This is a bogus case motivated by the police and many of its superiors." Atul ranted again and again.

"I am not giving this testimony due to pressure from senior police officers; this is my true testimony." Vikas Patil stood his ground.

Then came the turn of **Anant Kumar Shriram Ganediwal**, a senior executive working for Vakrangi Software Limited, who came forward to take the stand in an open court. He was around 54 and wore a grey business suit with a blue tie and navy blue trousers.

"I know Parag Matre, and I know accused No. 1 Vijay Palande. Parag and Vijay are classmates; Parag is from Pune, and we worked together as business partners. My mobile number was 9867549700, and the accused No. 1 used to talk to me on this number." Anant blabbers on.

It was also important to tell the court that all four accused had criminal backgrounds and had served jail time together. To establish that, the police took the help of 40-year-old **Umesh Eknath Kadam**, a driver hailing from Pune.

"I know Jagdish Kailash Shejav. I met the accused in the Kalamb Jail in Kolhapur. I was sentenced for a robbery case and was serving time in the said jail in 2008. The courts acquitted me. He used to give me training in yoga in prison. He came to Pune to look for a job and even stayed with me. He once asked for my mobile, which I gave him to use." Eknath now took the stand and spoke his mind.

"The police have tutored you to say this." Atul Pandey intervened.

"No, this is false." I am saying this freely; no one has asked me to say this." Eknath stood his ground even after the assault from the defense lawyers.

Dinesh Mahadeo Yadav was a 45-year-old electrician who took the stand. He sipped some water and began to talk after taking his oath. "On the 8th of April 2012, I was approached by a constable. I was told that the police needed my help to prepare a spot panchnama. They then took me to flats 101, 102, and 103 on the first floor of the Samarth Angan Building Society. I also met Harangat Singh on the spot. We went to the flat, and I saw two large brown curtains covered in blood and a bed sheet red and green covered in blood. We went to the bathroom, and there was blood everywhere. It was full of blood. The police took samples of blood by soaking it with cotton swabs. I also saw one black-colored mouse on the floor with a wire stained with blood. I also saw a sand-colored cotton vest soaked in blood. I saw a large knife with a wooden handle soaked with blood. I saw blood on the door of the bathroom; it had streaks of blood. Outside the bathroom was a chair, and under the chair was a large hacksaw. They're two bottles of Phynile in a black plastic bag. I also saw a big hammer with a large wooden handle. The police took all the articles. In the back bedroom, pillows and bedsheets were scattered all over, and I saw two shampoo bottles in its attached bathroom covered in blood."

"Under the TV dryer, we found the passport of Anuj Tikku with ten photographs and the diary of Shyam Yadav, who worked as a servant with Anuj Tikku. The police took all the documents under their custody." Dinesh spoke clearly at times, stopping to remember everything.

One by one, a female court clerk showed these articles to Dinesh. "One by one, a female court clerk showed these articles to Dinesh. "Yes, that is the blood-stained curtains; that one marked Exhibit 432 is the hacksaw, and Exhibit 311 is the knife on the floor." Dinesh identified all the murder weapons and evidence the police had taken from the crime scene, which was the first-floor flat of Block 3A Samartha Angan. He pointed towards the exhibits in open court.

Now, it was the turn of the accused, Vijay Palande, to do the cross throughout the trial. Vijay has been representing himself in court; the police say he has no money for a lawyer, which is why. But otherwise, a deviant freak like him was relishing the challenge to defend himself and poke holes in the police investigations. He got up to question Dinesh now.

'What is your educational qualification, Dinesh ji?" Vijay asked, almost roaring at the witness box.

"I have completed the 7th standard; I can read and write in Hindi, but I cannot read English," Dinesh answered.

"Do you, ahem, have any license for your profession?" Vijay asked the witness to be almost intimidating.

"Yes, I have a PWD license," Dinesh answered Palande, the accused, who was now defending himself in court.

"Have you been a police informer?" Vijay asked him.

"No, I have only been a panache witness in four or five cases before," Dinesh replied promptly.

"Do you pay income tax?" Vijay Palande asked, sticking to his line of questioning.

"No, I don't pay tax; my income is low, and I don't advertise my business." Dinesh barked back.

"Do you know how many lifts there are in the Samarthanga Angan Building?" Vijay Palande asked:

"22 lifts, as I remember," Dinesh replied, jogging his memory.

"The police have coaxed you to give this statement; you are lying in court," Vijay said. He was somewhat agitated that Dinesh was answering him so calmly.

"No, this is my true testimony." I saw all these articles in the flat, and I was not pressured when I came to court today. This is my true and honest testimony." Dinesh stuck to his truth.

The clock in the courtroom ticked away as one witness after another took the stand, giving their version of the truth laboriously and slowly. That's the thing about courts: they are slow, dusty, old, and very negative places. There is so much negative criminal energy in court.

Chapter Eight: The Last Day in Mumbai

"Thanks, Kadam. These witness's testimony will be like a gold mine for me. Please also give me the testimonies so far in the Karan Kakkad case. I need it for my books; they will be rich material for my crime novels." I explained it to my dear friend in the city, Gitsh Kadam.

"You are a brother, Anuj; anything for you, but I need an iPhone when you come here next," Kadam said, winking at me.

"No, I am not going to come to Mumbai." I will only come when the Sessions Court delivers the final verdict on the Arun Tikku Murder Case, and that will take over a year or maybe more." I replied, sipping a rum punch.

"I will be in this car for another two years, and I am sure the court will deliver its verdict by that time. But then this Chutiya Palande will go to the high court and the supreme court, and finally, his death warrant will be signed by the president." Kadam said she was hoping for a mango.

"Ya! But it won't be easy; there is a lot of slip between cup and lip, my dear. In Papa's case, we will get a conviction for sure, but in Karan's case, there are not many eyewitnesses, and the case is purely based on circumstantial evidence. "In this murder, there is no identity of the person; in that case, he will not be convicted for sure," I replied, discussing the respective cases.

"Don't demotivate me, Anuj." I have been working hard on both cases and so has Tawde. In Karan's case, Vijay took us to the admissible skeletons in court, and what was Vijay doing with his credit cards? He is guilty as hell. We are looking for a conviction in Karan's case as well." Kadam told me over drinks.

"Great, we can have a good party and call the press. I can also launch my book at the press conference. That's one more reason for me to return to Mumbai. I feel somehow, this city will never leave me. No matter how much I want to stay away from it, I keep returning to the Maximum City." I replied with a quivering voice.

"We will not get the press involved now; they might just ruin the case and leak false information. We will only invite them when the verdict is out." Gitesh Kadam made a valid point to me.

Four days of testimony, they had taken their toll. I was jaded and tired. "You need to work out, Anuj. You are fat. You need to do some gym." Kadam told me as he saw me munching on chicken fried rice.

"Don't taunt me, yaar! I have been walking ten kilometers daily; I just went easy a few months ago. But I continued my walks in the morning." I replied, looking at the menu to see what I could order next.

"How about some Kulfi?" Kadam asked me, and I duly ordered a kulfi.

"Vijay Palande chutiya hei, kya mila usko, he should have stuck to being friends; you could have had a great business today, maybe jointly owned a five-star hotel together. He was planning to take you to Slovakia, and I am told that's why he took your passport; he wanted to get a visa for you." Kadam said he was well acquainted with all the gossip that was flying around after my father's murder.

"He said he would make me a manager at his hotel in Slovakia. But that was all a lie; I don't know if he had hotels there. Spain and other Scandinavian Countries. He was just boosting pure bluff, and look what a fool I was; I fell for his crap." I replied, jogging my memory about a time gone by. It all happened eleven years ago, and now it's just a folk tale for generations to enjoy and savor. Whether true or false, no one cares as long as the story is captivating and engaging, which my story and the murder of my father were.

"Hey, I will eat one more gift from you; I need a bottle of single malt," Kadam asked me rather shyly. "Yes! My treat, but you have to help me with my story." I replied, to which he duly nodded.

"You are my guest in Mumbai, Anuj Ji." Kadam said with a huge smile.

"Will you get some prize or a medal from the crime branch?" I am sure you will get a certificate for solving the Arun Tikku murder case and getting the killers

convicted and sentenced. It will be an achievement for you and help build your career." I asked Kadam.

"I don't know about that, but I am doing it because it is my duty, and I feel this was very wrong. What happened to you and your father? I am doing this to get justice for you as a human being; the medals are all secondary. As it is, Srikant Tawad is now way too old; he will retire soon, but I will be on this case for some time now and see it till the end as I see it. Just be in touch with me; I will call you on the day of the sentencing, as I told you." Gitesh Kadam replied that he was a good man with a wife and little child, a family man, and he felt my loss and pain.

"The court proceedings are so slow; it feels so surreal that my father's ashes have now been reduced to a pile of files in a grey bag. I threw the ashes of my dad in the Ganges at Haridwar, but his field is still moving from one desk to another in the Indian Judiciary. The man was dead and buried eleven years ago, but these days, he is still gathering dust. My old man no doubt seeks rusticity; I can feel him from time to time in my dreams, but justice doesn't seem to be coming." I said with a deep sigh that I had a strange feeling in my stomach, and I sipped some lime juice to calm my gurgling stomach.

"But Palande is also suffering; he is getting mad in jail. You know how badly we beat him up; we put his head in a tire and hit him with bats on his buttocks and with belts. Bahut mara salle ko." Gitesh Kadam said it with relish.

Both of us enjoyed the Ratnagiri Hapus. I had stored a few in the fridge; this was the best time to slip them out of the cooler. "This is my treat to you." Gitesh smiled and cut a few pieces for me to have.

"You have done a huge thing, Anuj; it was essential, and you have done it in the nick of time. I am getting a positive vibe; you held your own in court against a very evil person. This wasn't very good, and you testified at the right time. It must have been draining on the soul having to relive the horror repeatedly while answering the defense lawyers' questions, but it's great that you are over and done with it all." Geoffrey responded in a very encouraging manner.

"I know I have done my duty as a son; this was important to me. I need a conclusion on this case and to finally put this episode behind me. But I feel that as

long as I live, I will have to live with the fact that somewhere deep down, I was also responsible for my father's brutal death, and that will keep biting me in the corner of my heart. I still have my survivor's guilt, which will only be quenched with Vijay Palinode's blood." I informed Geoffrey that he was intently listening to me on the phone.

"Well, I am sure the verdict will come someday, but you can hold your head high for now. You have crossed a huge hurdle in nailing this man. The court has finally heard you, and that is remarkable." Geoffrey said as if he were mightily pleased with my days in the court.

"You will need to rest, meditate, and calm the mind. The dreams you have had would have also drained you a bit. Let your body loosen up and remove all the knots in your head. I am sure your dad is watching from the heavens above and is mightily pleased with what you have done for him." Geoffrey replied, trying to egg me on.

"I am happy that I could speak to you and get your guidance during this difficult battle of my life. It did help me focus, so thank you, old friend, and I will be in touch with you in the future as well." I said. I hung up the phone and slowly fell into a deep sleep in room 207 of the Oriental Residency Hotel in Khar.

The next day, I arrived at the Mumbai domestic airport a few hours earlier, with the thought of the trail still swirling in my mind. I was pleasantly surprised to be upgraded to business class by the staff of Vistara Airlines. They may have had some accessible seats and gave me a free upgrade. That cheered me up, and I felt good about the day.

We may have had a tough day, but every day brings some pleasant surprises, and the business class upgrade was one such surprise. When I was on the plane, I took a deep breath and put the court proceedings behind me. Luckily, I found two great people beside me on the flight, and I chatted with them to my heart's content. One was a young chap in his early thirties who had been working on an oil drill with Saudi Aramco and was working in Saudi Arabia; the other was a dean of a business school in Dehra Doon. The gentleman even offered me to come to his institute to give a guest lecture, and I agreed.

I felt grateful to be alive. There was gratitude in my heart. The Vijay Palande episode was a very close shave for me. I could have lost my life for sure, but I am slowly getting over it and happy that the future is bright for me. I don't know how long it will take for the verdict in this case, but I am content that I did my duty as a son, which matters most.

"In your fight, don't forget the victim, the man who died, your father, Arun Kumar Tikku, who, for no fault of his own, had his life whisked away like this in such a brute fashion. No one should forget Arun Kumar Tikku." Geoffrey had told me over the phone, and those words were still ringing in my ears as I landed at the Dehra Doon airport. I had won one crucial battle, but the war to hang Palande was still on.

END OF THE TRIAL OF PALANDE

Karan Kakkad Ke Karnamey

The Trial of the Karan Kakkad Murder Case

Introduction: The book covers the courtroom trial and drama of the Karan Kakkad murder case. This is the story of the young man, Karan Kakkad, who was murdered by serial killer Vijay Palande's gang. The book is a rip-roaring courtroom drama; the stage is set in case 603 at a sessions court in Fort Worth. Karan's mother, Rita Kakkad, and brother, Harish Kakkad, prepare to testify in an open court. Read on and enjoy this intense courtroom drama.

The content of this book has been compiled through extensive research and by going through all legal documents and files of the case 603 Karan Kakkad Murder Case. Witness testimony and witness statements have been used to compile this book.

"Sab Dhanda Hei Sahib, Kya Karein." Dharanjay Shinde accused one.

"The first 48 to 72 hours are the most important if one has to crack a crime case."
Inspector Satadekar

"Cross-questioning is the only way to point holes in the police investigation."
Prashant Pandey, advocate

"No one is willing to take up his case; he is finished with Palande." IO Gitesh Kadam

"Karan Kakkad was very boastful; he was called Prince." Roslyn Khan

Chapter One: Case 603

The courts and the judicial system run on facts, clues, and evidence. The judges look at facts, the lawyers fight for every point on every piece of evidence, and there is no place for emotions and rumors in the court of law. It is on facts that lawyers debate and on cold witness testimonies that witnesses are cross-questioned. There is no scope for judgment, and everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. These are the values on which the judiciary works and functions. But is that the case in the Arun Tikku Murder Case and the Karan Kakkad Murder Mystery? Since both murders were committed by a gang headed by one man, Vijay Palande, aka Karan Sood, aka Kanu Bhai Rana, the press had a field day calling Palande the butcher of Chiplun and the serial killer of Kumbharli Ghat. The press had a field day searching for adjectives to label Palande. Clearly, he was the monster in human skin who was to blame.

Let's look at the fact that a man called Maini saw two men stabbing an older man from the French window of the 101/102/103 flat at Samarth Angan Building while he approached his car parked in the parking lot right in front of the flat French window. As he bent forward to open his car door, his eyes looked upwards towards the window. At that precise time, the window curtains fell, and the older man got six to seven seconds to beat at the glass window and ask for help. He was duly pulled back from the window by the two assailants, who had tied a computer wire cord around his neck. That was the eyewitness account. Then, Maini ran to the supervisor on duty, and they, along with three guards, ran up to the flat door to press the doorbell. That is a fact; that is the witness statement. The flat 101/102/103 was opened by a shirtless man wearing blue jeans. As he opened the door, the guards and the eyewitness saw blood on his bare chest. As they entered, they saw blood on the floor, and then they saw the second assailant, Manoj, under a bedsheet; there was blood on his feet. The medical report states that while stabbing Arun Tikku, Manoj, who had held Tikku by his back, slipped on the blood that fell on the floor. To balance himself, he tugged at the brown curtain, which then collapsed, giving Arun Tikku time to reach out at the window and beat on the pain, trying to get help. He was then duly pulled back into the room, which was closed. That was a fact. It was a fact that three eyewitnesses

saw the assailants attack Arun Tikku. Both Manoj and Dharanjay were physically present in the room. The murder weapon was found in the room. The cutters, wires, hammers, and black polythene bags were all in the room. It was a fact that this was pre-planned, and the assailants were instructed to chop up the body and dispose of it. The evidence points to this fact, and the material recovered points to this fact.

Maini was the complainant who dialed 100 before the police came in fifteen minutes. After that point, the rumors started, and the media and press were rarely interested in facts; rumors were juicier and sold more copies. Once rumors start, you can't stop them. After that, no one can be trusted, and everyone is a suspect. In this cloud of rumor, I became the chief suspect in the murder of my father.

The guards, when quizzed by the news media, gave the story that I was a drug addict and was not getting along with my father because he hated me working in the movies. I had a big fight with him on the fateful night, and in a fit of rage, with the help of the paying guests, I murdered my father. That was a rumor, not a fact that eyewitnesses' testimony could validate. But it makes for an excellent copy: a son murdering his father: "Bete ke ghar baap ka murder." That makes for a lot of entertainment; in today's world, news is entertainment. Four murders take place in Mumbai every week; this was the murder of a fourth senior citizen in Mumbai in the past few months, but the Arun Tikku murder case stayed in the public imagination for a long time, fueled by rumors and masala added by the electronic news media. "A son is murdering his father—now that makes for a fantastic headline. Add to that a serial killer who has murdered multiple men in the past, a honey trap, a stockbroker, corrupt cops, and frightened families, and now that's an excellent potboiler. As human beings, no one wants to get into the details of facts; everyone wants a great story and an even more incredible climax. As far as the Vijay Palande saga goes, we are way past the interval mark and are now slowly moving towards the climax, but there are still many twists left in the tale. The question is not the facts but what will make the climax entertaining and what will give the perfect conclusion to a very sordid, gory, and dark murder mystery.

We all want a decision, and I am sure this story will also have its climax. No one can tell what that will be as of now.

The ending everyone wants, which will make the backbenchers cheer and hoot from their seats, will be the hanging of Vijay Palande, who is undoubtedly the evil man who must be defeated at the end of the tale. He is the Ravan of the entire story, a heartless serial killer who gave the order and the supari to Dharanjay Shinde to murder Tikku and even convinced Manoj to participate in his dirty work. It is his wife, aka his sister Simran Sood, whom he used as a honey trap to identify rich, lonely men to target for their wealth and money. Clearly, he is the villain of the story, and his previous actions definitely point to him being a ruthless serial killer. If Raman Raghav was the poor man's serial killer, Vijay Palande is the rich man's serial killer, and as the audience, we all want him dead and hanged for his crime committed in such cold blood. Only will it give the saga a happy ending and satisfy us all, an evil man getting his just death. Now that the public wants to see Vijay Palande's Kankal, he must be buried in the dust of Ratnagiri and Chiplun like he buried others: "Ab Palande ka Potla bane ga." As one cop told me early, waiting for him to hang, "Bahut log rope lekar batha hei, use hang karney ko." Kadam had told me. It's clear everyone sane wants the man turned except for the defense lawyers and Vijay Palande himself, but unfortunately, no one wants to believe his narrative, and it's simple: why? He has done it so many times before; he is a history-sheeter, and this is not his first murder.

But what is Vijay Palande's narrative? He says that the supari to murder my father was given to me as I benefited most from his death as all the properties came to me.

But that narrative falls apart with the discovery of my suicide note in his joint bank locker with Simran Sood. That makes his story and truth fall apart, as now, instead of being a suspect in my father's murder, I have become the victim for the first time. The fact is that Vijay Palande has stood as an accused and under trial for over eleven years because no one is buying his narrative, and no one is

convinced of his truth, no matter how much he tries to deny being the mastermind of the murders.

The public likes rumors, and this saga has many: honey traps, face correction surgeries, cocaine and heroin, sex, murder weapons, suicide notes, and whatnot. The more the story ran in the media, the more rumors turned into facts, and more facts turned into rumors. The defense had many of their own.

After all, it was Vijay Palande who wrote a letter to the vigilance commission saying that my brother Samit Tikku gave two crores to Commissioner Devan Bharti, and through his blessings, I got a clean chit so soon in the case and was not charged like the rest of them. The defense team said in court that it was paid in cash, which is why there is no proof. That, of course, is a rumor and not a fact.

The problem that the judges, the lawyers, and the police have is wading through the rumors to get to the facts through clues and a murder timeline. The whole case falls apart if one chain in the timeline or witness testimony falls. The job of the defense lawyers is to find that gap or that error that creates doubt in the judge's mind. Once there is doubt, the timeline will fall apart, and the prosecution case will also fall apart.

Any case, however watertight it might be, can fall apart at the trial stage, and the accused can escape conviction.

Vijay Palande was only convicted for the murder of Swarup Ranjan Das but went scot-free in the murder case of his son; the prosecution could not prove his guilt or link him to the body. Vijay

Palande is no doubt waiting for the Karan Kakkad and Arun Tikku murder cases to fall apart similarly.

But from the first sighting of the murder, so many people get involved in an investigation that the absolute truth becomes diluted by the hour. If the assailants and perpetrators are caught within the first two days of the incident, the case will remain watertight, but if there is a delay, new runners and new facts emerge that will dilute the case every day. The body of Karan Kakkad was found months after he was murdered, and it was found only after Palande was arrested. The same goes for his other victims, but in the Arun Tikku case, the assailants were caught doing it, and that is why the police could arrest the killers so quickly and even file a charge sheet within three months.

Vijay Palande had a foolproof plan, but his assailants could not execute it because the older man, Arun Tikku, fought like hell and managed to beat the window pane to get help. The older man was strong and fought to save his life; the minor cuts and bruises on his shoulder and face are a testimony to that. Luck had finally run out for Vijay Palande; this was one murder too many, and my suicide had not finally sealed his fate. Everything that could go wrong went wrong, and I saved my life purely due to chance, good luck, and fate.

The gossip and rumors continued for months, and everyone was fueling the fire, from cops to news reporters to newspaper editors and even society neighbors. More the gossip, more the news. Everyone wanted breaking news, and every day brought a new twist to the murder case. After all, I was a Bollywood actor, and this was Underworld meets Bollywood. It had sex, a honey trap, drugs, booze, a suicide note, a police chase, and whatnot. Every day that passed, facts were getting diluted, and rumors were becoming facts.

Palande was unable to cut a deal with the commissionaire, Deven Bharti. He told Bharti, "You must have Manoj and Dharanjay close the case; the murder has been solved. He even promised to give Bharti Santosh Shetty in return, but this time, the superiors in the police force needed help to help him.

He was arrested from VT station and booked for the murder of Arun Tikku. His luck had run out; the senior officers he had helped as a Khabri turned against him. He was of no use to them; he had done one too many killings.

The people who know the truth are the eyewitnesses who saw the murder take place. From the time the police arrived at the flat, we started getting into the domain of rumor and gossip, and by the time the press came to know of the news, rumors began spreading fast.

This one murder opened a Pandora's box for Vijay Palande and his gang, as Karan's mother Rita saw Vijay Palande's face in the news. She informed Amboli police that this man was Karan Sood, who took Karan Kakkad along with him for a meeting with a politician so that he could raise money for his film. That is when Vijay was quizzed about the disappearance of Karan Kakkad, which led to the discovery of his skeleton, which remains in Kumbharli Ghat.

Karan Kakkad's trial had also progressed at a languid pace. His mother had testified, but the case had not moved an inch. But now, after two high court orders, activity had started again, and witnesses were also being called in the Karan Kakkad case. It was also going on in my father's case in the sessions court in Fort Case Number 603, which was the Karan Kakkad murder case. Twenty-five witnesses had already given their testimony in court, including Karan's brother Harish, who had suffered a lot due to his brother's death and the poor financial condition of the family. They hadn't even been able to obtain Karan's final rights. Death certificate, as all they had were Karan's bones.

Karan Kakkad, the Delhi lad all but twenty-eight, who had come to Mumbai to make it as a producer and became a model coordinator who made money through cricket betting, met his end at the hands of Palande and his gang. His mortals remain, begging for justice; they give him sleeping pills and then slit his throat in his bathroom.

His trial was also progressing at a snail's pace, but today, there was a buzz in the air as the fingerprint expert had been called to testify in case number 603. Anil Baburao Nikam was fifty-three years old and lived in Navi Mumbai.

"I have been working as a fingerprint expert since 2001 at the fingerprint bureau in Mumbai. I have been an expert witness in over 800 cases and am also associated with the "All India Board for Examination of Fingerprint Experts. The Amboli Police Station asked me to come in and help as a crime had been committed. I reached the station at 6:10 p.m.

"I was then taken to the Oberoi Springs Building on the 22nd floor, where I was introduced to two Paanch witnesses in the passageway. API Patil rang the bell of the house, and a lady by the name of Rita Kakkad owned the door. I wore my gloves and inspected the kitchen area but did not find any incriminating evidence in the kitchen. Then I moved to the bedroom, which was locked, and Rita Kakkad opened it. In the bedroom, I did not find anything incriminating; in the dining hall, there was a teapot on the table and nothing else. Then we moved into the main bedroom. Again, I did not find any clues or prints, nothing incriminating. But on inspection of the back side of the main bedroom door, I found chance fingerprints. I applied universal black powder to the chance prints and developed the prints. My photographer, Saket Raut, then took photographs of the chance prints.

The session court clerk showed him Exhibits 269 and 266; these were the photographs of the chance prints. Anil identified them in an open court and gave his affirmation.

"I also made enlarged photographs of the prints in articles 3, 4, and 5." Anil pointed his finger towards the enlarged prints he had found in Karan Kakkad's Oberoi Springs flat.

"But only one photograph was fit for comparison; the other was unfit for comparison." Anil also stated

"I have compared the prints with the fingerprint slips given to me by the investigation officer and used a magnifying glass and Lenin Tester. I was given six fingerprints on the IO and asked to compare them with the chance figure prints we had found in Karan Kakkad's flat. I found that one of the six prints matched the chance fingerprint, and that match was off Dharanjay Shinde at Danny. The prints matched for sure, and I thought that the chance figure print at the crime scene matches the one of the accused." Saying this, Anil pointed his finger at Dharanjay Shinde, accused no. 3.

"Have you gone through any proficiency tests regarding fingerprints?" Atul Pandey from the defense did his cross of the fingerprint expert.

"No such tests are needed for fingerprint testing; I know the National Institute for Standards and Technology manual. I have, however, never published any book on fingerprinting, nor do I have any patents regarding fingerprints." Anil replied.

"When were diary entries made?" Atul Pandey threw another question

"Our office maintains a register and also has a chance to print a register." After I reached Amboli Police Station, entries were made." Anil replied, jogging his memory of the past.

"What are the documents in your hand?" Atul Pandey asked.

"These are the originals of the documents submitted in court," Anil replied

"How do you match fingerprints?" Now, Prashant Pandey got up to ask his question.

"There are mainly four patterns of the fingerprints, namely arch, whorl, loop, and composite, but I do not know the methodology of comparison provided in Henry's classification," Anil answered.

"Can you tell us what methodology you used for this comparison?" Prashant Pandey asked, trying to probe further.

"I did the comparison manually myself," Anil replied in haste.

"Are you sure that the method you used is fully proven?" Atul asked again, trying to break Anil into submission.

"I do not know the universal method of comparison of fingerprints by the name ACE-V." Indeed, the pattern of fingerprints is not mentioned in the report. Whorl-pattern fingerprints are found in about 17% to 18% of the population. I am stating this by referring to the Fingerprint Manual issued by the Fingerprint Bureau. I can also produce the manual in court. Anil rested his case and got out of the witness box. The court had heard him well and taken his testimony into account.

The next witness was Trikesh Rajendra Bende, thirty years old, working as a salesman at the MasterCard Auto Service Station Petrol Pump. The pump is on the Oshiwara Link Road. I have worked at the pump from 2009 to 2021. We did our duties in three shifts. At 8:00 p.m., a black-colored Mercedes car with plate number MH-04-DN-9111 came to the pump. The driver asked me to do a full tank; I refilled the tank fully; the amount was 4168.94, respectively; the driver paid by credit card, and I made a merchant copy of the transaction. The driver gave me a tip of Rs 1000 as a tip and then asked me where the toilet was; he then went to the bathroom." Trikesh replied.

"The individual was 5 feet 5 inches tall and aged 35 to 40." Trikesh then pointed at the accused, Vijay Palande, and identified him in open court.

"I also identified the accused Vijay Palande in an identification parade of seven people; two panch witnesses and a tehsildar were also present then.

"I can identify the merchant slip; the accused used an ICICI Debit card to pay for the petrol. It was PI Satardekar who prepared the panchnama in front of the witnesses." Tehsildar went on to say

Then, he was shown exhibit number 241, the merchant slips itself. Trikesh identified it in open court.

"Sir Arun Gawade was the manager of the petrol pump in 2012. The owner would allot duties in shifts to us, and he would also maintain a duty register. The police called me on April 26. I handed them the register, and photocopies of the relevant entries are kept. "Trikesh continued with his testimony.

"The cashier gives cash and swipes the machine and bill book when joining duties. He needs to maintain records regarding handing over these articles to the salesman. Merchant copies and bills are kept in the office."

"Every bill has a number." Prashant Pandey, the defense lawyer, asked in a booming voice.

"Yes! "Is it true that a bill is raised against every transaction?" Trikesh Rajendra Bende

"Can you tell me how many cars you filled with gasoline that day?" It was now Atul Pandey's turn to do a cross.

"No, I cannot remember that," Trikesh replied

"Did the police give you any letters when they called you to Arthur Road Jail?"
Atul Pandey asked

"No, I was not given any letter; I identified the accused in a parade; I recognized him by his facial expression, hair, and eyes. I remembered him because he gave me a tip of Rs 1000. We rarely get a tip of Rs 1000, so his face stuck in my mind. My head." Trikesh replied.

"After identifying the accused in a parade, I registered my name in the Arthur Road Jail," Trikesh confidently replied.

'You have been tutored by the place to say this; you have been dictated this testimony by the police.'" Atul Pandey tried to attack the witness.

"No, it is false to say that police asked me to say this; I did go to Arthur Road jail, and I did identify the accused in an identification parade. I remembered him because he gave me Rs 1000 as a tip that stuck in my head." Trikesh spoke his truth and then duly stepped down from the witness stand.

Chapter Two: Karan Kakkad ka Kapal

There was a lot of debate on the skull and bones that the police had recovered after days of searching the Kumbharli Ghats. The team of mountaineers and trekkers did find a skull and around eighteen bones at various stages of decomposition. Vijay finally led them to it, but he had made the cops go around the bend, confusing them most of the time. The Kapal, or the skull recovered, was too small, and according to Harish Kakkad, Karan's brother, the skull was not of his brothers, as his brother had a giant head, and the skull was way too small. He and his mother Rita rubbished the police's claim that the skull was Karan's. They were sure that only DNA evidence could tell which was what.

Karan, all but twenty-eight, had come to Mumbai to work in the Bollywood industry. He worked as a model coordinator, started a production house, and wanted to make a film. A young man with dreams, he made some money in cricket betting and even borrowed fifteen lakhs from his friend Harish to buy a second-hand BMW. He managed to stay in the Oberoi Springs apartment on the twenty-second floor for three years. He wanted to show off his Status, as he told his brother.

On the phone: "Status dikhana hei bhai, Bollywood is all about showing off. If you show you are big, people will talk to you." Karan had once told his brother on the phone.

He would go to the gym to build his body and even wear gold chains around his neck to show he had the money, and that's what became his undoing. He finally bumped into Simran Sood in the society gym, and they became friends. Simran also introduced him to Vijay; she said that Vijay at Karan Sood was her brother. Karan knew Vijay Palande as Karan Sood, which was the serial killer's third different identity, which he had adopted after being arrested for the second time

in 2006 for jumping parole and having a fake passport. Again, Imran acted as the honey trap and an informer to Vijay Palande. She informed Vijay that Kakkar had money he had made through cricket betting.

The stage was set once Vijay had won his trust as a friend through his usual sweet talking. In the evening, after dinner, Vijay Palande spiked Karan's drink with sleeping pills. They then gave him some more until Karan fell unconscious. He dragged him to his bathroom, strangely, and slit his throat, draining the blood in the toilet. They hoped for his body and packed it into suitcases. They stole Karan's credit card, some jewelry, and cash, dumped the suitcase into Karan's second-hand BMW, drove to Kumbharli Ghats, near Chiplun, and left the black polythene bags in the ghats area.

On the way, they left Kakkad's body at a friend's place in Pune. That's how Karan Kakkad, the Delhi lad, meets his grisly end. They even put his mobile in the toilet of a train headed to New Delhi station; it was just a move to confuse the investigations if they took place in any case.

At Rahul Mane's house in Krishna Keval Nagar, Kondhwa, Pune, the BMW of Karan Kakkad was discovered. Rahul Mane's brother-in-law was a lawyer who had fought Vijay's double murder case in 2009 and even got him bail. The advocate was Harshad Nimbalkar, who clarified that he had met Palande in 2009 and fought his case. "I believed him; he told me he was being made a scapegoat. But with these other murders he has committed, it is clear that he is a hardened criminal. I am a lawyer; it is my profession, and I have to fight my clients' cases, but I don't think I will ever retake his case. He is a real criminal. I have nothing to do with him, and if he approaches me, I will not take up his case." Nimbalkar made it clear to the investigating cops.

"Sir, I got scared." I saw Vijay's photo in the press and saw the image of the BMW. He had told me he was traveling abroad and had bought a new BMW; he just wanted to park it for a while. I have nothing to do with this man now; it seems he has murdered two more people." Mane made it clear to the police.

Rita and Harish Kakkad, forced to do their investigations, helped cops capture Vijay Palande. Harish checked his brother's bank statements and credit card transactions; they even went to the In-Orbit mall to get the CCTV footage, where they identified Vijay and Dharanjay; they had made some transactions there. Rita also had proof that her son's credit cards were also used in Bangkok. It was this investigation that helped the cops, who were still dragging their feet when the family made a missing person report on March 9th. It was March 5th when Karan Kakkad was murdered.

Rahul Mane later became a key witness in case 603. Karan Kakkad had died, his throat slit and his blood drained away in the bathroom. The finger prints of Dharanjay Shinde were found in his apartment in the bathroom. That linked Palande and his gang to the murder, plus the call records from March 5th to March 9th made it clear that Dharanjay and Vijay were in the Tech Chiplun area during that time and also visited Pune to park the BMW in which they had ferried Kakkad's body.

"We have no eyewitnesses for Karan Kakkad's murder case; all the evidence is circumstantial. We are trying to get more witnesses to make the case watertight. The missing person that was also killed with Karan, we have no clue who that is, and the case could fall apart in court." A cop told the press when the case was hot in the media.

Compared to the Arun Tikku Murder Case, Karan Kakkad's case was still a bit weak, although it was Palande who finally led the cops to the discovery of Karan's decomposed remains. The cops had found Karan's credit cards with Vijay Palande as well, but there were still no eyewitnesses who saw the murder take place.

Both cases were stuck for a decade and had hardly moved an inch till then. The accused were kept in custody and were in jail. But suddenly, the activity in Karan's case picked up pace as one witness after another came forward to give their testimony.

After Trikes, it was the turn of the store manager in the food bazaar store at Infinity Mall, Prathemesh Umesh Bhai Shroff, age 45, who took the stand.

"In April 2011, I was the service store manager at the food bazaar in Infinity Mall. If the customer wants to pay by credit card, he has to pay through the swipe machine and get a slip at the end. The customer swipes his credit card and punches the four-digit number; he only gets a slip from the machine. We get two slips; one we keep at the counter, and the other is given to the customer to keep, but the transaction only takes place when the correct code is entered into the machine after swiping the card.

"On May 5, 2012, crime branch police in Bandra came to Infinity Mall and our shop to inquire if someone called Karan Sood had purchased from our store. On May 7, I went to the crime branch unit nine office in Bandra and gave them an entire list of items purchased from our store with Karan Sood's credit card. I handed over the charge slip, which is in the name of Karan Sood. He had

purchased floor cleaners, mop utensils, drinking water, toilet cleaners, garbage bags, and hand gloves. These purchases were made by the cardholder, Karan Sood. At that time, one Varsha Kamble was the cashier." Umesh stopped to take some air.

A court clerk showed him Article 4, the charge slip, and Umesh Bhai identified it.

"I even gave the police a similar garbage bag Karan Sood purchased." Umesh Bahi continued with his testimony.

"How many customers come to your food bazaar every day?" Prashant Pandey got up to ask and cross-examine the witness.

"Around 1000 to 15000 each day," Umesh replied

"Are you sure the slip and Karan Sood's name can be pointed towards him in this room?" Prashant Pandey asked Umesh.

"Yes! I can." Umesh said that and pointed at the accused, Vijay Palande, who looked at him with disdain through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"How many credit card purchases are made every day?" Now Atul Pandey got up to do the cross.

"I would not know the exact figure, but after swiping the card, we keep the slip for six months before destroying it," Umesh confidently explained to the court.

"You are lying; you generated a bogus and false charge slip at the behest of the police." Atul Pandey boomed, trying to protect his client.

"No, that is fake; this is the real charge slip from Karan Sood." Umesh stood his ground and then slowly got off the stand.

Then came the turn of one Dhirendra Ram Murti Mishra, aged 41, who was one of the panch witnesses in the case.

"On April 28, 2012, at about 9:00 a.m., I was going in front of Bandra Unit Nine's office when a police officer showed me his ID card and told me that an accused had been arrested and was willing to give his statement and that I should act as a witness for that. Senior Officer Sanjay Satradekar asked me to give my name at the crime branch and introduced me to the accused, Dhananjay Shinde. There was another punch witness there called Jayesh Sawant. The accused said that he threw parts of the body in the ghats, and he was willing to show the police where he threw the said body parts. The accused signed the statement, and I was the panch witness." Dhirendra started narrating his tale to the court.

"Can you point out the accused?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"Yes! He is here in the court." Saying that, Mishra pointed at Dhananjay Shinde; he was peering at him in a corona mask through a laptop screen and had appeared throughout video conferencing in jail.

"I, along with the panch witness and Satradekar, then sat in the police jeep, which was being driven per the instruction of the accused. The accused led us from the Mumbai-Bengaluru highway to Khandala district, Satara. At night, we stayed in a hotel in Khandala, at the Ghatmatha Police Chowky. After that, the accused led us to Chiplun Road, and at a distance of 5 km from a police station was a mango tree. The accused stopped our vehicle, and we followed him for about 20 meters. We saw more, and the accused asked us to track him down around 20 feet, where we found a black plastic bag. The accused pointed at the bag; inside the black bag was another white bag. The bag had a foul smell, then both panch opened the bag, and there was the body of Karan Kakkad. We saw a dead body without the head, with legs cut up below the thighs. There were maggots in the body and dirty Levi's underwear; police took blood stain samples and soil samples and seized the black bags. They then put a seal on the articles and sealed them.

The clerk in the courtroom showed Dhirendra the black bag as exhibit 194, and he pointed towards it and identified it. He then led the witness article 19, simple soil, and article 20, blood-soaked soil, as determined by Dhirendra.

"I am educated till the 10th grade; I have an appointment letter and a card from HCCS Bank. I have never acted as a witness and have no criminal case against me." Dhirendra went on to say:

"What phone did you use in 2012?" Prashant Pandey asked the witness

"I do not remember the number, but it had audio and video facilities. I had taken photographs of the location. Police also took photos of the location where the body was recovered. We used a Scorpio vehicle to get to Chiplun." Dhirendra replied

"Have you ever gone to Kumbharli Ghat before?" Atul Pandey asked Dhirendra.

"No, this was my first time," Dhirendra replied.

"What did you have for breakfast, and who paid the bill?" Atul Pandey asked

"I don't remember who paid the bill, but we had eggs and toast for breakfast," Dhirendra replied.

"Did you fill up with fuel during the journey?" Atul Pandey probed again.

"No, I don't recall filling fuel," Dhirendra replied confidently, standing down after the cross-examination.

Security guards are essential in a murder case; they are the ones patrolling the entry and exit points in a building and watching over the video camera systems. Even in this case, a guard's testimony was crucial, and the court was early in awaiting the testimony of Santosh Kumar Durga Prasad Singh, the 45-year-old security guard working at the Oberoi Springs Building.



"Sir, I have studied till the tenth standard. We have two shifts: 8:00 am to 8:00 pm and 8:00 pm to 8:00 am the next day. On March 6, 2012, I was on guard at the main gate of Oberoi Springs. We had to note the person's name, car number, and the flat the visitor was going to. We recorded the details in a register. On March 6 at around 12:25 pm, one auto came to the gate. I asked the person here where he was going, and he said he wanted to go to Flat 705 in Oberoi Springs in the A-Wing. I saw a black color bag with him. When I asked what it was for, he started to argue with me and said it was none of his business. I took the auto number entry and flat number in my register. I can tell from the person's physique that he was 30 to 35 years old, had a complexion, and was thin. I can point to the person in court." Durga Prasad pointed towards Dhananjay Shinde in the witness box and identified the black bag as article number 24.

"I also identified the accused in a parade of seven people; he was in row number one; there was a magistrate, and two panch witnesses were also there at that time," Prasad said proudly.

The Vijay Palande show was itching to go at the witness, who got up to do the cross.

"Can you tell us how many exit and entry points are in Oberoi Springs?" Vijay threw his question, no doubt trying to test the guard's knowledge.

"There are three gates at the egress and three gates for the ingress. The security supervisor, the society secretary, and the chairman check the entry register. Durga replied

"How many autos came that day? Can you tell us?" Vijay Palande probed the security guard and tried to find loopholes and gaps in his testimony.

"I cannot give you that figure offhand." Prasad replied

"Do you know how many flats there are in society?" Vijay Palande further asked:

"For 105 flats, there are 35 flats on each floor," Prasad replied

"Do you know the name of the chairman of the Oberoi Springs Society?" Vijay asked

"No, I do not remember their names now," Prasad replied, slowly stepping down from the witness box.

It was then time for another guard to give his testimony, and that was Ravindra Yashwant Sawant, a 47-year-old guard also at the Oberoi Springs Building.

"I worked as a security supervisor from 2012 to 2015. At Oberoi Springs, 20 to 22 guards share duties in two shifts. At night, there are 15 to 16 guards." Yashwant explained his duties to the court.

"How many parking spots are there in Oberoi Springs?" Vijay Palande threw open his first salvo.

"There are three parking lots: P1, P2, and P3, and we have three separate entry registers for each parking lot." Ravindra Yashwant explained.

"Who were the guards on moving duty on March 6, 2012, at the main gate?" Vijay Palande was relentless in his questioning.

"Santosh Singh was the guard at the main gate," Ravindra replied confidently.

"Objection, my lord, it's a leading question." Advocate Matre got up to object, saying he was the lawyer for accused number two.

"See, P3 parking; Dinesh Yadav was on duty for our vehicle entry at the B-wing P3 parking. Tribhuvan Pandey was on duty.

"The accused numbers one and two should be given a copy of the register; they don't have it as yet." Advocate Matre informed the court.

"When the police asked me, I handed all three registers to them to investigate. My statement was recorded: "The registers are here in the court." Ravinder said, and then a court clerk showed him the three registers: article 6, article 7, and article 8. Ravinder saw and pointed at them; he had identified the exhibits in one court.

"Do you have an appointment with your security agency's BIS guards?" Vijay Palande asked the guard, who looked tired and jaded by all the questioning.

"No, I don't have any appointment letters," Ravinder replied.

"You are lying; the police have doctored the register to implicate me falsely." Vijay Palande roared in court.

"No, that is false. The police have not put any pressure on me to testify falsely." Devendra replied politely.

"Is it sure that no one can enter the building without following security protocol, and if someone is bringing consumer durables into the flat, like a fridge or AC, they have to register it at the security point in a register?" Advocate Matre asked

"Everything is noted in a register; we have handed them over to the police," Ravinder replied patiently, walking out of the witness box after his testimony.

In any murder case, it is essential to have the murder weapon. These were collected at the scene: the knife that Dhananjay Shinde used to stab Arun Tikku and the choppers that were bought to chop up the body of Karan Kakkad. So, where did the murderous gang get the choppers from? They got it from a street vendor named Harishankar Ramkrishna Gupta, aged 54.

It was now Gupta's turn to take the stand, which he duly did. "I am educated till the tenth standard, and I have been selling iron articles for gyms in front of Jodhpur sweet shop Andheri West. I also sell carpentry tools." Gupta stated his educational qualifications and his profession.

"On the 5th of March, a customer came to me wanting to buy one chopper and a Toyota. He said he wanted a sharp chopper. When I asked why, he said he had to chop a goat. I charged him Rs 150 and Rs 200, respectively; he gave me Rs 500, and I gave him a change of Rs 150. The customer then left, taking the chopper and Toyota with him." Gupta explained.

"The person's age was 35, and he is in court today." That Gupta pointed at the accused, Dhananjay Shinde, who sat in the accused box today.

"I can also identify the chopper and Koyta. The Toyota was blue, and a star tool mark was embraced; the chopper had sharp edges on one side and a wooden handle." Gupta explained to the court

Chapter Three: The Blood Brother

The murder weapon, in this case, a chopper and a Kota, had been bought by Dhananjay Shinde from a lowly street hawker who sold iron tools. That much was clear to the court now.

"How much do you make daily, and do you have any license to sell from BMC?" Prashant Pandey asked Gupta.

"Yes! I have a BMC license, and I make Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000 a day selling my tools." Gupta replied with utmost confidence.

"Do you have any business partners?" Prashant quizzed the man.

"No, I operate alone and have no partner. I have been selling these tools for over fourteen years at the same place." Gupta replied.

"Did the police call you for an identification parade at Arthur Road Jail?" Prashant further threw out an equation.

"Yes! I did, and I identified the accused; he was number 5 in the first row of the identification parade." Gupta replied, now slightly unsure of himself.

"You are lying; you are saying all this under pressure from the police; you don't have a license to drive in the area; the police have put pressure on you to testify falsely in court." Prashant Pandey now went for the jugular.

"No, that is not true; that is false," Gupta said confidently and stepped down from the witness stand.

The next witness was Uday Sadanand Gaurav, aged 54, the ASI from Dharavi Police Station. He took his sole oath and then gave his testimony.

"I was attached to DCB CID Unit 9 as a head constable from 2005 to 2014. In 2012, Sanjay Satadekar was the senior PI. On the 19th of April, I returned to work around 9:30 a.m. The PI took me to Harish Kumar Jeevan Lal Kakkad and Smt—Rita Kakkad, who were present in the unit office. I took them for DNA testing at Nagpada Police Hospital and took their blood samples. I gave a letter to Doctor Pratap Anand and asked him to conduct the DNA test. After that, the doctor took their blood samples." Uday spoke his truth as best he knew it.

"I also deposited blood samples at the FSL Kalina laboratory for investigation," Uday stated that on cue, a female court clerk walked up to him with an exhibit marked 199, a letter to Kalina Laboratory. After seeing it, the witness pointed at it and acknowledged it.

"Do you have any training for collecting blood samples for DNA?" Prashant Pandey asked curtly.

"No, I have no such training," Uday replied meekly.

"You are stating this falsehood because the police have pressured you," Prashant shouted out.

"No, that is false; this is my true testimony," Uday replied, standing back from the stand to gather his breath.

The next witness was Sanjay Manohar Jagtap, aged 53, who was the manager of the Oberoi Springs Society.

"Sir, the society has three wings: The A, B, and C. I have certain responsibilities as a manager of the maintenance of society, such as maintaining records regarding the sale and purchase of flats. To keep records of leave and license agreements for all the flats. One Mehta was the chairman of the society. Generally, agents approach society regarding leave license agreements." Sanjay explained his role in detail.

"Flat 2206 is situated in the B wing of the said flat as given to Karan Kumar Kakkad and his mother, Rita Kakkad, on a leave and license basis. Karan Kumar Kakkad gave me his PAN card and election car ID. I have the documents with me." Sanjay explained.

A court clerk showed him 234, 235, and 236 exhibits. These were the tenant information forms, and Sanjay got up to acknowledge them and pointed toward them.

But the testimony that all the court case watchers wanted to see was that of the brother of Karan Kakkad, Harish Jeevan Lal Kakkad. He had been relatively active in the media. He was the one who had said that the skull found in the Kumbharli Ghats was not of his brothers and that the skull was too small to belong to Karan. He was also shown on television with his mother, Rita Kakkad, at the Amboli Police Station, holding his missing brother's photograph. It was now time for Harish Kakkad to take center stage in this case and give his deposition as a witness on oath.

Harish Jeevan Lal Kakkad, aged 42, hails from Ludhiana and works in the transport business. It is important to note that Simran Sood was also called from Ludhiana before she arrived in Mumbai.

"I am Karan Kakkad's brother; my mother's name is Rita; I am educated till the tenth standard; and Karan was my younger brother, only twenty-eight; he was murdered brutally." Harish Kakkad broke down and started to sob; tears rolled down his cheeks as he remembered his slain brother. It was natural that after a decade, all his emotions came out. He had suffered a lot and had not even been able to get the death certificate of his brother, as the BMC did not recognize the bones of Karan; they wanted a body before they could give him the death certificate.

"When the incident occurred, Karan resided in flat 2206 in Oberoi Springs, paying Rs 46,000 monthly rent. He came to Mumbai in 2009 to work in Bollywood, where he worked as a model coordinator and music arranger. In February 2012, Karan called me and said he wanted to buy a BMW and wanted Rs 15 lakhs for it. He noted that it was for business purposes. He bought the BMW for 35 lakhs, and I gave him 15 lakhs. He would park the car in the parking place below his flat. At that time, my number was 9650613071, and Karan's was 9873926969.

"Karan then called me from his mobile to say that he would meet with someone who could finance his production house. He said Simran Sood and Karan Sood would make him meet this big man, but they wanted Rs 2 crore before the meeting." Harish Kakkad began his story of pain and the loss of his brother.

"I then called my brother on his mobile phone, but no one answered as it was not connected and switched off. On April 8, I tried calling Karan Sood, but his phone was also switched off. That's when my mother and I decided to come to Mumbai to investigate where Karan was." Harish went on to state this to the court.

"I and my mother took a flight from Delhi and came to Mumbai on March 9. I tried to call Karan Sood, but his number was switched off. My mother and I went to Karan's flat, which was locked. Then I informed the flat owner, Adarsh Mani, and he returned with spare keys. We opened the flat and went in. I saw in the bedroom that articles were scattered and the cupboard was open. My mother got suspicious. We told Adarsh Mani that we would keep the bedroom as it is. We closed the bedroom door and came to the living room. On March 10,

I inquired about Karan in the society; no one had any information, even though his BMW was not parked in the parking lot. Then. We went and lodged a missing person complaint at Amboli Police Station." Harish Kakkad stated that he was shown exhibit number 215, a copy of the missing person's complaint. Harish pointed at it and agreed that it was his complaint.

"Objection: the missing person's complaint is not there; there is the charge sheet, and today, at the last moment, it has been shown." Atul Pandey objected to the exhibit being shown in court at the last minute. The complaints were overruled by the judge, who was merrily dictating the testimony to the stenographers seated on his left and right.

"Karan, my brother, had accounts in Kotak Mahendra, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, and Andhra Bank. He used to use his debit card for transactions. Then, I went to ICICI, HDFC, and Kotak Mahendra Bank and got the details of all his debit card transactions. I was desperate to find my brother and started doing my investigation. I got information that Karan Kakkad's debit card was used to do shopping at Shoppers Stop and In Orbit Mall on March 11, 2012. Fuel was filled at the Lotus Pump Petrol Station in Oshiwara on March 10, 2012. "Here, his ICIC debit card was used."

Harish Kakkad explained to the court.

"My bother Karan Kakkad had no passport, so shopping was done in Bangkok using his Kotak Mahendra debit card. Shopping was done on this card from March 25 to March 27, 2012, and ATMs were using debit cards. I got footage from the mall CCTV and recorded it on my mobile. The video shows the accused, Vijay Palande and Dhananjay Shinde, shopping with my brother's card, but my brother is not there." Harish Kakkad explained to the court how his suspicion led him to Vijay Palande and his gang.

"Then, on March 17, 2012, I got a call from a friend of Karan's, Aditya Duva. He said that my brother's phone is now switched on and with another person. Aditya took me to a conference with Dr. Alok Gupta. Alok Gupta said that he found my brother's mobile phone on March 17 in the toilet of a train called Vaishali Express. He told me that he was depositing the phone in the storeroom of the Delhi railway station. On March 31, my mother and I went to the New Delhi railway station and got the phone from the store room. We handed over the phone to Amboli police on April 18, 2012. It was a BlackBerry phone, model number 9700. I inquired about my brother, and the residents of the society informed me that

Karan Sood, Simran Sood, and others had been arrested in another murder case registered against them in Oshiwara Police Station." Harish Kakkad said he looked tired and jaded; the toll of the testimony was tiring him out, and he asked if he could sit on a chair and then give his testimony.

"The police showed me photographs of Karan Sood in the Mumbai mirror. I asked them which court he was being produced, and they said Andheri Court. On hearing that, I went to the Andheri Court. The police told me that the actual name of Karan Sood is Vijay Bhivajirao Palande, and Manoj Gajkosh and Dhananjay Shinde have also been arrested with him in the Arun Tikku Murder case. Harish Kakkad, who was now giving his testimony seated in a relaxed posture, looked more in control of what he was saying.

"Then, on the 9th of March 2012, I checked my brother's bedroom and found many of his items and things missing. His three mobile phones, a Nokia, a Samsung Tab, and a Blackberry, were missing from his room. His three laptops—Apple and HP012, I checked my brother's bedroom and found many of his items and things missing. His three mobile phones, a Nokia, a Samsung Tab, and a Blackberry, were missing from his room. His three laptops—Apple, HP, and Lenora—were also missing. His one iPad and gold chain weighing 150 grams were also gone. Five grams of gold pendant, diamond earrings, one 82-gramme gold chain, one silver bracelet, one gold bracelet, and one BMW car were all gone. I quickly made a list of these things that were not in his flat anymore.

His debit cards from Axis Bank, Kotak Mahendra Bank, ICICI Bank, and HDFC Bank were also missing." Harish told the court, recollecting the horrors of days gone by.

"On the 12th of March, I complained about all the missing items with the Amboli police," Harish said on cue; a court clerk showed him exhibit 203, the report he had filed for the missing items. Harish pointed at the exhibit and admitted that it was the report he had filed.

"I again went to the police with the boxes of the Nokia and Blackberry mobile phones," Harish explained.

"Why did you take the boxes to the police?" Atul Pandey, the defense lawyer, wanted to know.

"I gave the boxes to the police to determine whether someone was using these devices." Harish Kakkad replied.

"Then again, I was called to the crime branch, where I handed over the Blackberry phone to the cops, and they told me that the case had been transferred to crime branch unit nine." Harish went on with his tale.

"They then took us to Nagpada Police Hospital, where our blood samples were taken; this was required for DNA analysis, as the police told us," Harish spoke confidently to the court.

The female clerk showed Harish article 213, Karan Kakkad's Blackberry phone. Harish Kakkad recognized it and pointed towards it. A silver bracelet was also shown to him, and as per Article 15, Harish acknowledged it.

"To whom does the silver bracelet belong?" Atul Pandey asked forcefully.

"I had made the bracelet myself, and when Karan came to Delhi, he asked me for it, so I gave it to him as a gift."

"On May 7, the crime branch called us to identify the bracelet, and I was able to identify it amongst other bracelets." From 2009 to 2012, I was in the real estate business, earning five lakhs per annum. I also paid income tax on the said amount every year, for which I have the income tax receipts. I need to find out how much income tax my brother Karan was paying. I had given 15 lakhs to Karan in 2012 to buy a BMW, but I need to find out where he got the other 20 lakhs from. I do not know what work Karan was doing in Bollywood, but he was making a music album that had yet to be released. I understand that no criminal case is registered against him in Delhi. "

Harish Replied

"Is it true that your brother was impacting others in fake rape cases in Delhi?" Atul Pandey asked, trying to discredit the witness.

"No, that is false; that is not true." Replied Harish Kakkad

The testimony of Harish Kakkad went on for three days at a stretch, and he was cross-questioned many times, asking about the bank entries and his income tax statement. The questioning the defense lawyers were doing was to discredit him and cast aspersions on his character.

"Is it true that your brother sued to supply escorts at parties, and he would also supply model Roslyn Khan to other clients?" After all, he was also a model coordinator. Prashant Pandey tried to tarnish the Kakkad family.

"No, that is not true at all. Karan was just friends with Roslyn and wanted to cast her in his film, which he wanted to produce himself." Harish replied curtly.

"Is it not true that your brother supplied high-class call girls to important clients?" Now Prashant Pandey pushed again.

"No, that is wrong; it is false," Harish replied bluntly.

"Then how much money did your brother make by making a music album? Can you show us some entries of the Rs 46,000 he paid as his rent?" Prashant asked Harish Kakkad.

"I do not know how much he made, and no, I don't know if there are such entries in his bank account statements." Harish Kakkad replied, looking puzzled at the question.

"Do you know the names of the branch managers you spoke to regarding your brother's bank accounts?" Prashant Pandey said aggressively

"No, I don't remember their names. I had made an oral request to them but did not give them any letter." Harish replied.

"Do you know the buckle number of the security guard who gave you the CCTV footage in the In Orbit Mall?" It was now Vijay Palande's turn to ask some probing questions.

'Have you and your mother given an interview to a Hindustan Times journalist named Pooja Changowalia for her book Front Page Murders?' Vijay asked Harish Kakkad.

"No, I do not know such an interview for any book with any journalist." Harish Kakkad replied bluntly.

"Your brother would sometimes sign his name as Kapoor in some election cards," Vijay asked Harish Kakkad.

"No, as far as I know, that is false," Harish replied, and the drama went on and on with objections and cross-questioning from both sides. The court proceedings are slow, laborious, and workmanlike. Harish Kakkad looked drained at the end of the day and often looked at the wall clock, desperate to get out of the courtroom and get some fresh air. I mean, he was the dead man's brother, a victim, and he was being treated like a criminal in court today as if it was he who was responsible for his brother's fate. He and his family were being ridiculed for supplying call girls and having FIRs lodged against them in Delhi. There was a lot of finger-pointing

and mud-slinging in court, which seems to be the norm. After all, this was a murder case involving a serial killer.

Harish Kakkad would often look at his mother, seated in the crowd on the second row, for strength and confidence. Occasionally, Rita would start crying and sob, no doubt remembering her long-lost son; she had not even been able to do his last rites. This was a mother who was bleeding from the inside, and she had no choice but to show her pain in court; after all, she was the dead man's mother. This was indeed a trying time for this deriving family. On top of that, they were being called names in public, they were involved in a call girl racket, and their son was into cricket betting. But they had to persevere and get justice for their slain son, Karan Kakkad, who was so brutally killed by Vijay Palande and his gang of merry bandits.

The court moves through a lot of paperwork and processes that take time. The murders of Arun Tikku and Karan Kakkad took place in 2012, and both the bereaved families are still fighting for justice eleven years later. Even now, no one knows how long the case will continue. If the session court gives a verdict, Palande can appeal to the high court, the Supreme Court, and the President. The process is so lengthy and laborious that this case keeps going on. It is frustrating and very disappointing for the victim's family. The only solace that can be found is that the perpetrators of the crime are still behind bars and languishing in jail; the death penalty is a faraway thing.

The law takes its course, leaving the victim's families in tatters. As for the criminal, he is still alive, no doubt waiting to find his freedom again so that he can find his next victim and kill again. That's precisely what serial killers like Vijay Palande do, and that's what they will keep doing if they are not put to sleep forever. Once a

serial killer tastes blood, there is no stopping him; he can just go on if he manages to escape through the loopholes of the law, which Palande, over time, has become. He has trained himself in law by fighting his case and sitting in Taloja Jail, where he offers his legal services to other criminals for a fee. This man is a shameless mother fucker who is some vermin to society, and if let loose, he will kill again and again because that's his world, and that's all he knows.

The initial fight by Rita and Harish Kakkad to find Karan is commendable; they got no support from the cops initially and took to investigating the case themselves. Karan was missing, and the family researched where he was. It was only after the Arun Tikku murder broke into the media that the police started taking Rita and Harish Kakkad seriously. But by then, Karan was six feet under Chiplun, and his bones were mixed with animal skeletons so that no one would know what was what.

The system fails to deliver justice to the weeping families because no one knows the complete truth, and the system doesn't care at all.

People like Vijay know that well and bide their time as the cases go cold until the criminals escape. Vijay had murdered before, but with time, he had managed to buy his freedom from

The courts and the law. That is a cold, hard fact. It is the system that needs to be corrected and overhauled; there should be checks and balances in the system so that a hardened criminal like Palande is not able to get away with cold murder.

Chapter Four: More Witnesses

Naresh Dutta Ram Gupta, aged 61, was the next witness to testify in court in the Karan Kakkad Murder Case.

"I have worked as an exceptional executive officer from 2002 to 2013. I was entrusted to conduct the identification parade and have completed a test identification parade of silver bracelets. I ran a test identification parade on May 7, 2012, from 6:00 to 8:00 pm at Crime Branch Hill Road. I went to the chamber of SI Satardekar, and two more panch witnesses named Yousuf and Maqbul were introduced to me. Rita and Harish Kakkad were also present at the parade. Then Satardekar bought a sealed brown envelope for me. The envelope was shown to the panch witnesses, and then it was opened by the SI. I selected six bracelets from the ten silver bracelets presented to me by the SI.

"What was the basis for selecting six bracelets out of ten?" Atul Pandey asked Naresh.

"Those six bracelets appeared to be silver bracelets taken from sealed envelopes. I returned the four bracelets to the police," Dutta Ram Gupta replied.

"Go on with what happened next and tell the court." Atul Pandey asked Naresh Dutta Ram

"Well, I arranged the seven bracelets in a row and asked Harish and Rita Kakkad to identify the bracelet they thought belonged to Karan Kakkad. Harish identified

the silver bracelet marked three." I then called Satardekar and told him witness number one had identified bracelet number three.

"Then I changed the positioning of the seven bracelets; I now kept the silver bracelet identified by Harish Kakkad as serial No. Six. After that, Rita Kakkad was asked to identify her son Karan's bracelet, which Harish Kakkad identified as serial No. six." After that, Rita Kakkad was asked to

She identified her son Karan's bracelet, and she placed the silver bracelet marked number six. I then made the panchnama and signed on it." Naresh Dutta Ram explained as he waved his hands in the air animatedly.

The court clerk showed him exhibit 247, a copy of the panchnama that was carried out, and Naresh pointed at it, excepting that the document was correct and indeed signed by him.

"Did you check the identity cards of the other witnesses?" Prashant Pandey got up to do the cross.

"No, I did not check the ID cards." Naresh Dutta Ram replied sternly.

"You have signed the panchnama, which was prepared before by the police, but not so." Prashant Pandey boomed.

"No, it is false. That is false." Naresh replied instantly.

"Do you know of any guidelines for doing a test identification parade? Prashant Pandey asked the witness, Naresh Dutta.

"No, I do not know of any guidelines on this matter," Naresh replied

Now Vijay Palande, who was going to question the witness, got up and asked, "Have you read Section Nine of the Indian Evidence Act?"

"No, I have not read it," Naresh replied

"Did you check the weight and size of the bracelet?" Vijay Palande asked.

"No, I did not consider the weight and dimensions of the silver bracelet." Naresh Dutta answered, saying he slowly stepped out of the witness box and finished his testimony.

The court proceedings continued in the afternoon, and hot air would flow into the courtroom, making everyone restless and uneasy. One could hear the footsteps of lawyers and policemen walking across its many chambers, making an echo-like sound reverberating across the many chambers and walkways of this old fort session court built in gothic British style. Its old, jaded iron lifts ferry court clerks and judges alike.

The next witness, Ramesh Kanhaiyalal Gupta, aged 44, arrived to testify on the stand, "A police Hawaldar stopped me on April 15 and took me to flat 2206 in the Oberoi Springs building. He said he wanted me to become a witness, and I duly agreed, giving me a card and photographs to the Hawaldar. Inspector Shivaji Patil asked me to sign as the panch witness, and I agreed." Ramesh Gupta explained in a clear voice.

"Who was the other pach witness?" Atul Pandey asked.

"The other witness was Shiek, the fingerprint expert was Nikam and the photographer was Rathod," Gupta replied instantly.

"So, where were the fingerprints taken from in the flat?" Atul Pandey asked.

"The bathroom door knob of the attached bedroom had two figure prints that were taken. I have roasted the Panchanama along with the other witness." Gupta replied.

"What is your profession?" Atul Pandey asked.

"I am doing business as a decorator; I won my shop." Gupta answered.

"Were the fingerprint experts and photographers wearing police uniforms?" Atul Pandey threw another question, trying to corner the witness.

"No, they were in plain clothes without uniforms." Ramesh Gupta said it clearly.

"How many photographs were taken, and do you know the brand of camera used to take the pictures? Atul Pandey, the defense lawyer, threw another salvo; it was clear that he wanted to show lapses in police procedure.

"No, I do not know the camera brand used or how many photographs were taken," Ramesh replied without getting flustered.

"Do you remember the key and lock number of the flat?" Atul Pandey further questioned the witness.

"No, I do not remember the number of the key or the lock." I did not see the number." Ramesh explained to the court

"You are lying under oath; the police have pressured you to say this and testify falsely in court." Atul Pandey ranted.

"No, I am not lying; this is my true testimony.' Ramesh Gupta stood his ground even after such ferocious attacks by the defense lawyers.

"This witness testimony has been dictated to you by the place officers Tawde and Kadam." Atul went on to say it with great force.

"No, I came here at 3:00 pm, and no one told them what to say; this is my truth." Saying that Ramesh Gupta, the panch witness, stepped down from the witness box.

The next witness was Mohammad Bhanu Maqbool Haq, aged 42, who worked as a mason.

"I was approached by the police to be a panch witness and taken to the crime branch. I agreed to become a witness. I was introduced to the accused, Dharanjay Shinde, who agreed to present the chopper, Toyota, and silver bracelet. A panchanama was made, which was duly signed by me." Haq explained that at this point, he was shown the signed panchanma, which he pointed to and said that the signature on the documents was indeed his.

"Then myself, police officer Patil Madan, along with other panch witnesses, boarded a police jeep and drove up to Saraswati Apartments in Pune. The accused took us to room eight, situated on the second floor of the building. The accused had lost the keys to the apartment, which were smashed open by the police when we entered the room. Then the accused took us to the mezzanine floor and pointed to a bag, which was taken by the police." Haq went on to state what he saw.

"Then the accused took us to the geyser in the bathroom, where on top of the geyser were the chopper and Toyota, which were taken by the police," Haq mentioned.

He was then shown articles 23 and 24, The Chopper and Toyota. Haq pointed to them and agreed that they were the said articles recovered by the police.

"The police also took possession of a large black bag with over twenty-seven documents and electricity and water bills for Vijay Palande. I duly signed the panchanma documents that were made after the search of the apartment room." Haq went on to state:

The court clerk then showed the witness exhibit number 256 and article 30, the bag, and the search documents. Haq pointed to them and affirmed that they were true and correct.

"Can you tell me how much money you make and do you pay income tax?" Vijay Palande asked.

"I make Rs 5000 a week." I am a mason, and people call me for work. I do not advertise, but I pay income tax." Haq replied.

"Have you been rated as a panch witness before this case?" Vijay asked him.

"Yes, maybe one or two, but I do not remember exactly," Haq replied sheepishly.

"Is it true that you helped Siddhartha Nagar residents commit community theft of electricity, and to avoid police action, you are testifying wrongly in this case?" Vijay Palande went for the kill. It was clear from the defense tactics that they

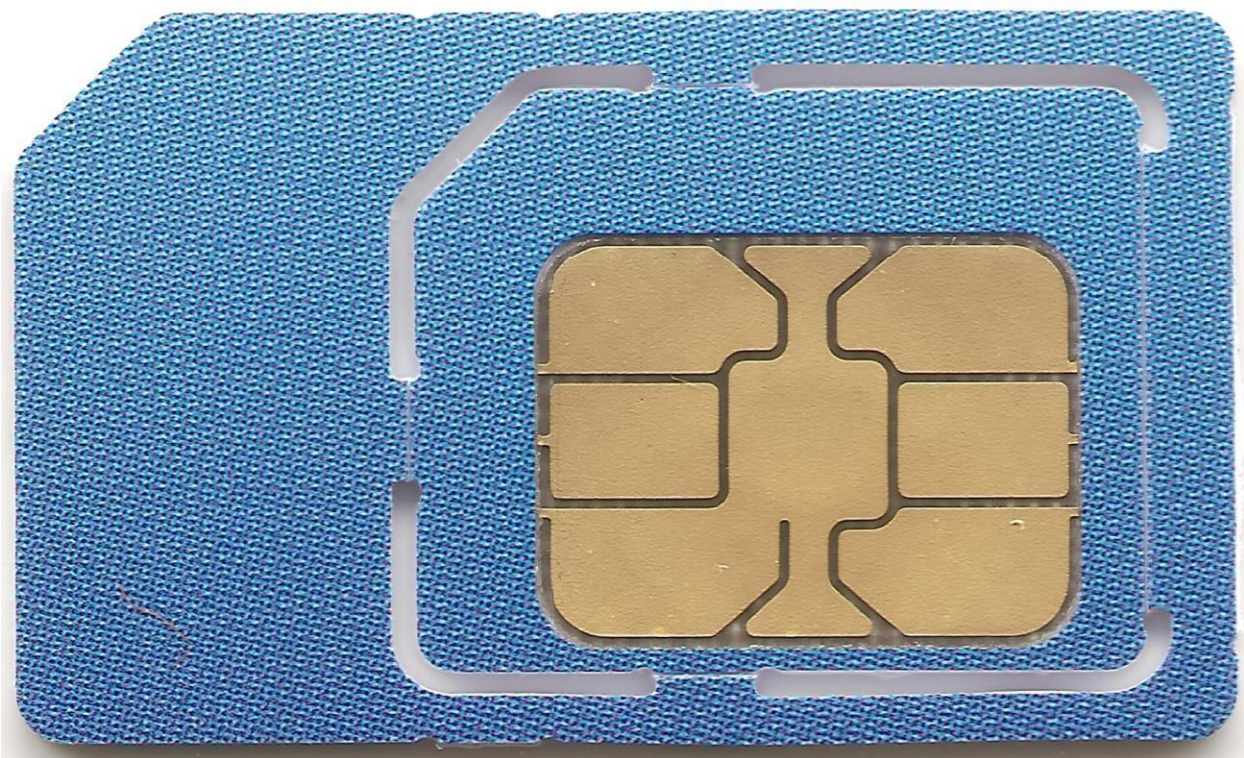
were trying to discredit every witness by questioning their dubious past or bringing up old cases in which they may be involved. The tactic was to discredit the witness and then show that they were deposing false testimony due to pressure from the police. Then, they were trying to discredit the police by pointing holes in the police process and procedures. This was a two-pronged pioneer strategy the defense and Vijay Palande used to create doubt in the judge's mind.

"Do you remember the name of the Hawaldar who called you to become a witness? Did you see his ID card? Vijay Palande did his cross-questioning.

"No, I do not remember his name, nor did I bother to check his ID proof," Haq replied with intent and force after saying he slowly stepped down from the witness box. He slowly sat on the chair near the door, wiping the sweat from his brow.

It was then the turn of Yasin Ahmed Shaikh, aged 42, to give his testimony. "I was going towards Hill Road when the police called me to become a panch witness. API Shivalkar and Patil were in the room along with other witnesses. Harish Kakkad showed us a Blackberry mobile with a sim. He said that the mobile belonged to Karan, his brother. I witnessed the fact that the mobile was wrapped in a brown bag. The panchanama bears my signature, as Ahmed Shaikh explained to the witness.

The female court clerk showed Yasin Ahmed the brown bag with the BlackBerry mobile. Yasin pointed to it and agreed that it was the mobile that Harish had first demonstrated to everybody. This was exhibit 124, and Yasin turned towards it and ascertained that it was the mobile.



"What is the name of the officer who called you to become a panch witness?"

Atul Pandey asked.

"It was one Bhatkar." Yasin replied

"Do you know the SIM card number of the mobile? Do you remember whether the number was mentioned in the Panchanama?" Atul Panday quizzed him further.

"No, I do not remember the SIM card number," I confidently replied to Yasin.

"Do you remember the battery type of the said mobile?" Now Palande got up to throw a question.

"No, I do not remember that fact," Yasin replied

"Do you remember the name of the policeman who signed the panchanama?" Vijay asked with force.

"No, I do not remember his name," Yasin replied. He looked agitated; it had been so long, and his memory was failing him.

"You are lying under oath; the police have asked you to depose false testimony." Vijay Palande boomed.

"No, that is false; this is my true testimony." Saying that Yasin Ahmed Shaikh stepped down from the witness stand because he had had enough and looked happy to get out of court. One by one, the witnesses were brought to the court by the police, who were determined to nail Vijay Palande this time around because he had committed just too many murders. But the process of law is slow, and as of now, Vijay Palande was able to survive one more day. He was trying to push his hanging as much as he could. He looked audacious and confident in court, but was that true? Way inside, in some deep place, he must know that time for him on this earth was running out. The legal system is made of people, and every person in the chain has a job to do, which they were doing, but no one could tell when the case would finish and a verdict would be reached. That was very frustrating for me as the victim's son. I wanted justice and wanted it fast. I had patiently waited for justice for eleven years, but it still eluded me.

It was not fair, but life never is. It is unfair, and no matter how much you want to rationalize the events that unfold in your life, you rarely can. It was difficult for me to fathom why this tragedy took place in my life. No matter how much I sought answers from signets and wise men, no one could give me the answers

that would quench my thirst and rest my aching mind. I was still lost, a lost boy in my state, lucky for me. People empathized with me, and being the victims, the police treated me with gloves and helped as much as I could. "Anuj Tikku, we might need you to give testimony in Karan's case as well; we need to know what sleeping pills he gave Karan; you had mentioned that he had also borrowed some sleeping pills from your house.' Kadam had told me. "Yes! I am ok with that. I will testify anything to keep this bastard in prison." I had replied to the cops, who were with me all through. One thing was clear: everyone wanted Vijay Palande dead except for his defense lawyers; today, no one was on his side.

Karan's case, although different from the Arun Tikku murder case, had similarities as the same gang committed the crime, so it was not unusual for the cops to ask for help in Karan's murder case as well.

I could feel for Harish and Karan's family; they did not even get to burn their child; it was that bad for them, and on top of that, they were called names by Vijay Palande and the legal team of the accused; this seemed very unfair to me. But life is never fair; it has not been appropriate for anyone. No one has a perfect life, and no one can ever have an ideal life.

Losing a loved one so brutally is terrible enough, but then the fight for justice is even worse. No one should endure this ordeal; I would not wish it on my worst enemy. But then, this was my karma and my destiny, and I had to go through this hellfire even decades after my old man was gone and buried.

Karan Kakkad would have never imagined that he was hanging around with a convicted serial killer, nor could I. That's how amiable and harmless Vijay Palande looked to us; his guile and criminal mind took in both of us. I ended up almost losing my life and, in the end, the life of my beloved father, and as for Karan, he

was mercilessly hacked into his flat. The butcher who did the job in both of these cases was Dharanjay Shinde, who, after having spent decades in a life of crime, could murder anyone after a few bottles of rum and vodka. This murder spree was lethal and intoxicating at the same time. For me, I am just happy to be alive and glad to be breathing. Having come so close to my death, I have stopped fearing death itself. As I go about my daily life, I have put the inside behind my mind, but I am occasionally reminded of it when I see a piece in the media or a crime story. They always talk about the Arun Tikku murders and Vijay Palande's killing spree.

I feel for Harish Kakkad, who is not very well off now after his brother's death. He is in the transport business, which is not very stable, and he is not well educated. The family's suffering has been further increased as they were not able to get a death certificate after Karan's death. Due to that, they were not able to take the money from the account of the slain Karan Kakkad. Imagine the plight and agony of the family. Destiny had dealt them a bad hand, and they had no choice but to accept it.

As Vijay Palande gets fat in jail, his victim's families suffer outside the prison. What good can come out of a calamity like this? I would never know. I can say this for sure: this is a tragic tale of humungous proportions, and just like any tragedy, all the characters in this play end up on the losing side. This play has no winners; it is that dark and lonely.

As for Vijay Palande, it is business as usual; it is his life of crime, and that is all he knows.

"Uske ise dhande ko Bhagwan mana." Kadam had once told me while we were discussing Palande. Now, he stares at his death. It must be painful seeing yourself

move closer to your grave each day after every court proceeding. That is a sad, slow death in itself. But why should a hardened criminal like Palande care as he sees us all slowly headed toward our graves? What is so new or extraordinary about it? We all will die one day, but as long as he is alive, Vijay will fight tooth and nail for his truth, and his truth is that it was I who ordered the slaughter of my beloved father.

Life throws lemons at us, and it is up to us to turn them into lemonade. That's what I have tried to do after this very dark and gory incident in my life. I had met a cousin and sister of Karan Kakkad once in a mall after the incident broke out. "We should speak to the police and transfer the case to Delhi Court, Rita Kakkad said. Karan's mother is too old, and they can't travel to Mumbai for the case for a month." She had told me, but I kept my distance in those days. I wanted to stay away from everything related to my father's murder case. I was so petrified. I tried to help the family but wanted to avoid the case. My grandmother had advised me to forget the episode, and my lawyers had asked me not to contact any of the other victim's families. So, although Karan's cousin gave me her number, I did not get it then. I just wanted to beeline with my grief.

Chapter Five: Karan Kakkad and Roslyn Khan

Simran Sood was not the only B-grade starlet who was in the eye of the storm as the girlfriend, wife, and sister of serial killer and gangster Vijay Palande. There was another glam doll who was questioned by the Amboli Police in connection with the kidnapping and killing of Delhi-based Karan Kakkad, and that was Roslyn Khan, a model and actress who had done some semi-nude ads for breast cancer awareness. She was supposed to be Karan Kakkad's muse and his girlfriend who would chat with him often on his BBM.

Roslyn Khan added to the glamour angle of the case, and the TV news media had a field day along with much-needed gossip on a murder case that seemed to never end. Roslyn was called for questioning by the police, and a lot of the news media was waiting for her to give her statement.

"I am not Karan Kakkad's girlfriend or his muse. I knew Karan only casually." Roslyn Khan said to the news reporters: What the cops also wanted to know from her was if she knew any other of Karan's friends. They were trying to figure out who could be the third person Vijay Palande had murdered since, along with Karan's body parts, they also found a rotting skull. The cops wanted to know who that third person was since they were still not able to find the identity of the third skull.

"I and Karan exchanged messages; he was called 'Prince.'" He wore gold chains and boasted that he was building a production house and was ready to launch his new film as well. He had asked me if I was willing to act in his film." Roslyn told the police in her statement She also threatened to sue Simran Sood for defaming her and dragging her name into this very sordid tale. The cops had told Roslyn Khan that it was Simran Sood who told them that she was close to Karan Kakkad and was his girlfriend.

"Karan was very boastful, but I did not believe him much. He had also called me when he bought his new BMW; he wanted to take me out for a ride in his car

and also asked me out once, but I refused; I only knew him casually." Roslyn explained this to the police at the Amboli Police Station.

"It is true that Karan and I chatted on the mobile. I have shared all his SMS messages and even some YouTube video links with the police. Me and my family have suffered enough. I do not want my name to be dragged into all this; it is unfair to my parents. Some newspapers stated that I wanted cheap publicity from all this, which is not true at all. I am not a murderer; I have not murdered anyone. It was Karan who was getting close to me because he wanted my contacts. I had done some famous ads for a breast cancer organisation. I did not



want anything from Karan; he was trying to use my contraband instead." This was the truth about wannabe actress Roslyn Khan.

The police, however, kept probing. They were not involved in her sex life with Kakkad, but they wanted to know if she knew any of his friends and if any of Karan's friends were missing. They also wanted to know who that unknown skull recovered with Karan's decaying bones belonged to. That was their motive

for questioning the starlet.

But TV channels interviewed Roslyn live, and they also had her on chat. She was openly denying she knew Karan more than a casual acquaintance. Roslyn Khan was a tall, plump, fair, and reasonably buxom lady, and she added the glamour element to this case along with Simran Sood, who was rather skinny compared to Khan.

Roslyn was on a chat show with India TV, and she even managed to give a few bites to Sahara TV, who were running a three-part documentary on Vijay Palande and his killing spree, trying to find out how the gangster managed to operate and who he was close to within the circle of the Mumbai Police. In the documentary, Vijay Palande is labeled as Bhasmasura, who sued his close contacts in the police to run his empire off crime.

"Karan Kakkad would walk near the society pool; that's where he met Simran Sood. He told me this on the phone once." Rita Kakkad had told a news reporter at NDTV.

However, Rita did not know Karan was in touch with Roslyn Khan, and she told the cops. It was Simran Sood who dragged Roslyn Khan's name into the murder investigations.

"This is the dark side of the glamour world and its ugly side." Inspector Rupwate had told me a long time ago.

This back-to-back murder spree had bagged so many eyeballs that even famous

socialite Shobha De wrote a column on the entire sordid episode in her column in the Asian Age titled 'Murder on the Menu.'

"Mumbaikars used to express shock and awe at violent crimes in the city, but the latest killing spree has woken us all up.' Shobha had written in her column:

"The young starlet Simran Sood, who is a bit of a social climber seen in IPL parties and Bollywood grand events, is at the center of the storm. She supposedly helped Palande identify young rich men and trapped them for money and their property." Shobha De wrote in her column:

The city of Mumbai was in shock. Who is safe if people are not safe in the comfort of their posh flats in well-guarded societies? Both Samarth Angan and Oberoi Springs, where both crimes took place, are protected societies with religious cameras and many guards on duty at all times.

How can serial killers kill people like that in the safety of their own homes? This was ridiculous. There was news in the papers that people in Oshiwara and Lokhandwala had stopped renting their apartments to wannabe actors and strugglers. "Flatly denied." Screwed the newspapers. The killing spree of Vijay Palande and his gang proved that Mumbaikars were not safe at all and that anyone could be killed in cold blood. Fear and panic gripped Mumbai in those days as journalists and crime reporters ran around in circles to figure out the absolute truth. But the more they tried to make sense of the tragedies that befell the victim's families, the more confused they got. The entire city was rifted with rumors and half-truths, and here we say it was tough to get to the absolute truth.

For the police, it was clear that Vijay, Manoj, and Dhananjay were criminals with prior convictions who had previously spent time in jail for severe offenses of murder and looting. Clearly, they had committed the crime; after all, they had done it to so many families before. Vijay Palande was trying to wriggle out of all this till the last minute. He tried to cut a deal with Devan Bharti, but his luck had run out this time. No one was going to let him get away with this back-to-back killing spree. "I will give you Chota Rajan, sir. Let me go. You have the two guys who were caught doing the murder. I have nothing to do with this. My name is not there anywhere." Vijay had pleaded with Bharti, but there was no way that the senior officers in the force who had benefited from the tips

That Vijay Palande used to give them about rival gangs was going to let him go. The media pressure on the top cops in Mumbai was just too much. They needed a scapegoat, and Vijay was just that. The media pressure was relentless, and the police had to show results, so they made sure that Vijay Palande was booked as the key conspirator in the murder. For that, they went by the book, had plenty of witnesses present at every stage of the investigation, and even had an identification parade of the killers done. They did not want to leave anything to chance and wanted to present a watertight case to the judges and the courts.

Roslyn Khan added the much-needed Path-aka to this Diwali of raw blood; she was sensual and hot. "People say I am going around giving interviews because I need publicity; that is so hurtful. I am just helping with the investigations. It's just the media and the news reporters who keep bugging me for interviews and TV bites. I said calmly that Karan Kakkad was not my boyfriend but an acquaintance. I have shared all my chats with the cops; it is unfair to drag my name into all this." Roslyn kept saying this to the news media. It's just that when shit hits the fan, everyone starts running for cover; no one wants to be associated with shit. But

doing a few fireside chats and interviews in the local media helps and keeps you in the news. As they say, there is nothing called lousy publicity in Bollywood; all publicity is good as long as it keeps you in the news and relevant. It is how you use the story to your advantage that matters most.

Roslyn Khan was not a novice; she knew how to get attention; she had done semi-nude ads and some good modeling assignments, and she knew how to twist the media with her words and charm.

The TV8 Marathi debate was when Roslyn Khan came into her own. The TV debate had a detective, a psychologist, and Roslyn Khan as their chief guests.

"So Roslyn, it is said that you were involved with Karan Kakkad, and he had even offered you a role in his movie that he was going to produce with his own production house?" The actor, dressed dapperly in a suit, asked Khan, "Yeh! Sahi nahi hei, Karan was a struggler, and I did not believe him. How could a smuggler offer me a role? Me-in ek do bar casually, Karan se mili the that's all." Roslyn Khan stuck to her story.

"But you exchanged messages with him, and he would tell you much about what he was up to. Is it true that he was a cricket bookie as well?" The TV actor threw another question: he knew that Roslyn Khan was the glamour element in his show.

"I don't know if he must have spoken to his friends about me to show off with his friends, but I always thought he wanted to use my contacts instead." Roslyn Khan told the anchor

"Nahi aap ka naam Rita Kakkad ne kaha hei, ki aap Karan ki dost thi, aur Simran ne bhi police ko bola hei yeh!"" the TV anchor went on to say.

"I don't know; maybe he must have spoken about me to his family, but I knew him only casually. He used to drive an Accord that was also second-hand, so I was amazed at how, in just six months, he had bought a new BMW. He must have made a lot of money very fast; a struggling person can't afford a BMW. He must be betting, which is the only way to make a quick buck." Roslyn informed the anchor.

"How can a Mumbai serial killer murder five people one after the other, and all this go unchecked by the police and the administration?" This Vijay Palande seems a psychopath, don't you think, Dr. Gupta?" The anchor turned to the psychologist, Dr. Gupta, who had been brought to the studio to analyze Vijay Palande's mind and how this criminal operated.

"Yes! He is a serial killer, and he kills for money and property. He is manipulative and intelligent, and he plans all his moves. Strangely, he was let loose among us unchecked for so long. Somewhere, the police and administration also have a lot to answer here. If the police had done their job by the book, this would not have happened.' Dr. Gupta gave his input on the matter.

"Roslyn Khan, has it been tough for you to have your name dragged into this murder case?" The anchor asked the seductive actress

"Yes! The cops have been calling me to give my statement, and I have had to go to the police station to explain things. It has been a difficult time for me and my family. I didn't have much to do with Karan Kakkad; I found him boastful. He told me that he had the money but needed my help with contacts to make his own production house and launch me in his film. But I always thought he was a showoff and did not know anyone influential in Mumbai." Roslyn Khan spilled the beans on her relationship with the now-slain Karan, whose bones and mortal remains were being dug out of the Kumbharli Ghats by a team of seasoned mountaineers.

"See, we have to look at the fact that all the people he has killed were rich and had some amount of wealth. Even in the poorest strata, there are serial killers, but this is a man who preys on the rich, and with Bollywood actor Anuj Tikku being involved as one of his alleged victims who got away, this case has been highlighted so much in the media. Our society has always had serial killers; he is a man with a criminal bent of mind." Dr. Gupta explained.

"What a killer! He had three different identities." Karan Sood, Kanubahi Rana, and Vijay Palande, and after his first double murder, he jumped parole, changed his looks through plastic surgery, and even worked with an underworld don called

Santosh Shetty. Quite colorful as a serial killer, don't you think, Dr. Gupta?" The TV anchor kept the debate running.

"Yes! It seems so, but this also points to the police-criminal nexus that is so prevalent in Mumbai: how a man with such a track record was let loose in the city to do more crimes one after the other, and that too, cold-blooded murders, that is beyond me. Our police have a lot to answer to. "Dr. Gupta went on to say:

Roslyn Khan indeed got her two minutes of fame on TV, and although she sat through the TV show with a glum face, it was apparent she was also enjoying the attention.

One after the other, graphics of blood, knives, and bones flashed on the TV screen, somehow trying to add intrigue to the show. It was apparent everyone likes a good murder, and here was a story that had five. Why not? This news was hogging TRP's month after month. The story refused to go away as angle after angle came up, and every day, the viewers were given the latest twists and updates from the case.

Roslyn Khan, of course, went on to do a crime show years later; no doubt some equity from the murder case rubbed off on her image, and the crime show producers wanted to cast her because she was associated with the murdered Karan Kakkad.

She was also embroiled in an Internet controversy a few years later when someone solicited business on her behalf using her photographs and images, asking clients that they could have sex with her for Rs 50,000. This was done through a fake account, and Roslyn was inundated with messages on her

Facebook page from guys asking her for sex; they were all ready to pay her cash for it.

The two girls, Simran Sood and Roslyn Khan did add a lot of spice to the murder spree of Vijay Palande and his gang, and the audience was just lapping everything up. A former Glad Rags model, she had also done a B-grade film called Dhama Chowkri apart from the semi-nude breast cancer ad. It is so ironic that she did a breast cancer awareness ad to help women, and now, after ten years, she has gotten cancer. A tragic twist of fate, one has to agree.

'You see, being a bookie, Karan would say that he would always carry ten to twenty lakhs in his car, as most bookies do. Betting is a cash-intensive business. His boastfulness and his ego got the better of him." Roslyn Khan informed the anchor just before he was about to close the show. The show also ran an interview with Rita Kakkad, a very modest-looking elderly Punjabi lady wearing an old shalwar kameez. "See, the police have taken fingerprints from Karan's flat, and we have made a list of all the missing things. But I still feel my Karan is alive," she said, saying the lady broke into tears.

So apart from running a call girl racket, Karan was also a part-time cricket bookie, and the rumor was that he even used Simran for his dirty work at IPL cricket parties. TV news channels were full of pictures of a scantily clad Simran Sood hobnobbing with Australian cricketers and film stars alike, and that's when the cricket betting angle became red hot.

On the other hand, the media had gone berserk, and Roslyn was adding the much-needed glamour element to the case. More Witnesses were hotly debated on NDTV about the new modus operandi of criminals and how Mumbaiers were not safe even in their flats.

"What I can't understand is how one can take someone's property by killing them; after all, the next person's next of kin will become the owners of the property."

An expert told the news channel:

What has Mumbai come to? We are not safe in our own homes. What are the police and establishment doing to make us feel safe?" A lady barked in a telephone debate.

The dark tragedy had turned into a dark comedy as the debate on television continued and charged up by new revelations in the case every day.

Chapter Six: Rita Kakkad's Testimony

This case, apart from picking holes in the policy process, also showed the masses how toothless and slow our judicial system is. The first person to give her testimony in the Karan Kakkad murder case 603 was his mother, Rita. She had given her testimony in 2014, and now, even after ten years, the case has only reached the halfway mark. Rita Kakkad, aged 59, was a chubby Punjabi housewife, and it was with her testimony that the case proceedings began in 2014.

"The deceased Karan Kumar Kakkad was my youngest son. I have two sons; the elder is named Harish Kumar. Karan was 28 years old at the time of the incident. I was residing in Delhi with my son, Harish Kumar. He was living in flat 2206 at Oberoi Springs, Veera Desai Road. It was a rented flat; he had been staying there since August 2011 and had come to Mumbai in 2009 to work as a model coordinator and a music producer. The BMW number MH-14-DE0008 was a second-hand car he purchased on February 23, 2012. He had called me and told me about the purchase; he had borrowed Rs. 15 lakhs from his brother Harish to buy the car. On March 5, my son Harish got a call from Karan, and he informed me that he was going to meet a financier to raise money for his film with his friend Karan Sood. He also said Karan Sood had demanded Rs. 2 crore from him to arrange the meeting." Rita went on to explain to the open court that as her days became moist and red, the images of her son had come back to her, and her pain poured out in the sessions court. She paused and took a sip of water, trying to wipe her tears with her dupatta.

"On April 6, my son tried to contact Karan, but his mobile was repeatedly switched off, and he could not contact him. Then, we decided to come to Mumbai to look for Karan Kakkad. We reached his flat and found it locked, so we called the owner, and he came with duplicate keys. We opened the flat and entered it; everything was scattered in Karan's room, so we decided to sleep in the other

bedroom that day. We tried to find Karan's whereabouts on March 10, even though his BMW was missing from the car park. After much deliberation, we decided to file a missing persons report." Rita went on to speak of her tale of horror.

"Karan was wearing two gold chains, a gold pendant, a golden bracelet, and two diamond earrings. He had one silver bracelet, six mobiles, and one to four ATM cards. We could not get any items in his flat; they were all missing. On April 19, my son Harish Kumar and I were taken to Nagpada Hospital for our blood test." Rita went on with her testimony.

"I know the bracelet well; it had a sunmark on it. I can identify it in court." Rita explained to the judge. At this point, the court clerk showed Rita a bracelet, a Kada article number two. She pointed at it and identified it as being Karan's.

"I had also identified the bracelet at the police station; yes, this is the bracelet," Rita told the court.

"My son Harish is in the real estate business and earns Rs 5 lakhs a year, but he is not doing too well, so Karan will chip in and give us money to run our home in Delhi. Since Karan's death, Harish has gone into depression and is not doing too well in business. We have suffered a lot after Karan's death; our position has gone from bad to worse economically. We have struggled immensely since his murder." After Rita started sobbing again, a policeman gave her water. She drank water and tried to steady herself like a typical Punjabi lady, but her emotions improved.

"I have not seen Karan Kumar's car, although he did show me some photographs of his BMW when he came to Delhi last." Rita went on to say:

"Do you remember Karan's bank account or mobile number?" Atul Pandey, the defense lawyer, asked.

"I do not remember Karan's mobile number, but he had a Blackberry, Samsung, and Nokia mobile phone. I do not remember his bank account numbers." Rita replied.

"Did Karan Kakkad pay income tax?" Atul Pandey now asked Rita.

"Yes, he paid his income tax, and so does Harish," Rita replied.

"Is it not true that a crime against Section 376 of the IPC was registered against Karan Kakkad in Delhi?" Atul further tried to discredit the Kakkad family.

"No, that is false; he was called to witness a case, that's all," Rita replied, ashamed at the cross-questioning.

"Is it not true that Karan Kakkad was running a call girl racket in the garb of being a model coordinator?" Atul kept to the defamation angle.

"No, that is false," Rita replied.

"Is it not true that a crime against the PETA cat was registered against Karan and my family?" Atul Pandey kept the pressure on.

"No, that is false; no such case is registered against us at all," Rita replied.

"Did Karan Kakkad do any courses before coming to Bollywood?" Atul Pandey asked.

"No, he did not do any courses before visiting Bollywood," Rita replied that she looked tired; she had given her testimony over three days and wanted to get off the stand. She had been humiliated in open court; muck had been thrown at her by the defense lawyers of the accused, and it was too much for the old lady to take. As if the loss of her son was not bad enough, the family had not even gotten a death certificate from the BMC after Karan's death, as the BMC needed proof of a body, and all the family had been his decomposed bones. The system had let them down, and they were disgusted with the system and how slow and bureaucratic it was. They had not been able to forget his brutal killing, and now they were being assassinated in open court by Vijay Palande and his defense team, who were determined to discredit their family and call them names in an open court.

The court fell silent for a while after Rita Kakkad's testimony. It had been very emotional to hear a mother lamenting for her murdered son. She was the first witness in the case and spoke her truth as best as possible.

Now it was time for the next witness to take the stand: Dr. Pratap Daya Anand, a 65-year-old and retired medical doctor.

Then, Pratap pointed to articles 1 and 2 and confirmed that they were his signed identification forms.

"I am an MD in chest medicine, not an expert in microbiology or pathology. We maintained all outward and inward registers to collect blood samples for DNA at the Nagpada Hospital. All the blood samples were given to the police in proper containers for the forensic laboratory. I also obtained acknowledgment from the police and have the receipt of the blood samples." Dr. Pratap answered

"Do you know the existence of the Maharashtra Civil Medical Code and the hospital administration manual issued by the director of medical health in Maharashtra?" Atul Pandey, the hired defense lawyer, probed.

"It may exist, but I have not seen or read it yet." Dr. Pratap replied:

"Is it not true that all medical officers, while taking blood samples, have to abide by the rules and processes laid out in the medical health manual of Maharashtra?" Atul Pandey asked.

"No, it is not required." Said Dr. Pratap

"Who filled out the forms in Article 1 and Article 2?" Atul asked further questions, probing the witness and determining if all processes and procedures were followed for DNA testing and blood sampling.

"The clerks in the office filled out the forms and then signed them." Dr. Pratap replied instantly.

"As per the norms and protocol, it is essential for the medical officer to analyze the genetic abnormalities as far as collecting DNA samples is concerned. Did you do that?" Atul Pandey asked further, taking a dig at the doctors and trying to dent his credibility.

"A medical officer is not interested in genetic abnormalities." Dr. Pratap answered

"Do you know that as per Chapter 13 of the Maharashtra Civil Medical Code 1976, there is a procedure and norm laid out for collecting blood samples?" Atul asked further, saying he wanted to show lapses in procedures.

"I have read it, but I do not know about the process in chapter thirteen." Dr. Pratap answered.

"Do you remember the names and height of the panache witnesses?" Atul said he was getting frustrated that he could not corner the doctor.

"No, I do not remember; it was long ago." Dr. Pratap replied and then quietly stepped down from the witness box.

DNA testimony is very dull as many technicalities and processes are discussed, and if you are not a science graduate, it is difficult to follow. But these are critical to getting a conviction; thus, lawyers focus a lot on DNA. The defense always wants to pick holes and gaps in the blood collection process and how the DNA sampling was done for the case. Here, Doctor Pratap stood his ground, which was very commendable.

The hum of the court went on as criminals and convicts were dragged by Hawaldar and police officers all across the various corridors.

Next was the testimony of ASI Uday Sadanand Gaurav, aged 52; he now took the stand. In April 2012, I was assigned to crime branch unit nine. PI Satardekar asked me to take Rita Kakkad and Irish Kakkad to Nagpada Hospital for DNA and blood tests. He also gave me an authority letter, and I took the son and mother to the hospital. He then pointed to exhibit 92 and confirmed that this was the letter.

"The doctor, Pratap Anand, then took the samples and handed them to me with the receipt in adequately sealed containers to be taken to the forensic lab in Kalina. The lab also took the signatures.

of two panch witnesses, whose names I do not recollect now." Uday gave his testimony with confidence and elan.

"I gave the samples to Kalina Lab. I went there with API Deepak Sawant and got a recipe after delivering the blood containers to them. I also got a recipe from them." Uday explained the entire process and confirmed the documents shown to him as exhibit 93.

"Do you remember the name and vehicle number of the vehicle you used to get to the Nagpada Hospital? Prashant Pandey got up to do the cross.

"No, I do not remember," Uday replied after jogging his memory.

"Do you remember the name of the lady, countable buckle number 980410, who was with you then?" Prashant Pandey asked as if he were just getting warmed up.

"No, I do not remember the lady counting," Uday asked hesitantly.

"How did you start your journey to Kalina Hospital?" Prashant Pandey further quizzed Uday.

"I started my journey from Kalina Hospital DCB CID Unit 9 office at approximately 5:00 pm to 5:15 pm," Uday replied without getting flustered.

Police witnesses are essential in a murder case as they add credibility to the case. In this case itself, there were over twenty police and forensic witnesses. What was necessary for the judge was to figure out that all processes and procedures were followed while extracting blood and doing lab tests on it for DNA. The defense wants to see if contamination has happened to the blood samples during testing and packing the blood into tubes. If there has been contamination, the defense can say that the DNA analysis is not foolproof, is unreliable, and cannot be admitted as evidence against the accused in court.

The questions thrown at the doctors and cops involved in DNA were directed to point out these mistakes and human errors that could have occurred. It is simple: the defense lawyers have to create doubt in the minds of the jury or the judge. If they can do that, they have a better chance of getting an acquittal for their client. It must be stated that Vijay was accused of murdering both Swaraj Ranjan Das and his son Anup Das, but he was only convicted for the father's murder and got away with the murder of the son. In that murder case, he was acquitted. So his lawyers had been able to create a doubt, and that had helped Palande.

On top of that, the cops had not challenged the court's verdict in the high court. But this time, there was a steely resolve in the police to avoid making the same mistakes as before; this time, they would not let his lawyers point out the shortcomings in their investigations. The police had also studied old files to ensure no errors were made during the trial. All the police witnesses were holding their own in court and answering defense questions with the utmost confidence.

"We are also humans. I felt so bad seeing Rita Kakkad cry in court. Do you know she still feels her son is alive? He has just not returned home. She is still living with the pain of her past. We have to

fight for these families after all; that is why we became cops in the first place: to do good and justice for people." Gitesh Kadam told them in court once.

But all in all, court proceedings are not very dramatic like in the movies; there is no thumping of fists or sound of the hammer from the judge calling "order," order." All one hears is cells typing away and the fan whizzing slowly through the cells.

It is a struggle and dull; the judge does the job of a translator more than a judge, and the lawyers raise irrelevant issues to increase the paperwork. Most of the time, the lawyers fight over mundane documents and failed processes as the accused sit quietly in the accused box, staring blankly at the walls. Most of the time, I saw Dhananjay and Manoj stare blankly at the audience. Only the wily fox, Vijay Palande, would get up from time to time to cross the witnesses. I felt, however, that most of his questions were irrelevant and needed more direction.

For the families of the victims, it was a lonely walk and an irrelevant procedure that they had to go through, knowing fully well that nothing would come out of it. The person they loved has long gone, and now they have only memories of their loved ones, which get tainted and soured again in court with allegations and counter-allegations being thrown. It can be a very bitter experience for the victim's families.

As for Vijay Palande, he would be dressed in a white shirt and black trousers. The mother fucker did not give even a single impression that he was sorry for what he did. No, he looked cold and calculating even during the court proceedings. Either way, he gave the impression that he was suffering in jail. Having put on weight in the last decade, it did not feel like jail life had

I have broken him at all. The man was simply shameless, oblivious to the hurt and pain he had caused.

Chapter Seven: Mystery Politician and Match Fixing Angle

Karan was a suspected bookie and helped fix IPL matches with the help of Simran Sood and some models for whom he was the coordinator. That is the rumor that was flying during the time Vijay Palande confessed to his murder. The theory of doing the rounds was that both Vijay Palande and Karan Kakkad were business partners involved in cricket betting. Vijay Palande would also launder dirty money for an influential politician; the name floating around at the time was Sanjay Nirupam, who was with the Congress Party. Vijay Palande was into hawala, and he would also launder and funnel dirty money off Sanjay Nirupam into an IPL match-fixing and betting syndicate. Simon Sood's photographs with crickets at IPL parties must have been the reason for this story angle to be thrown around at that time. Many prominent newspapers, like Samna and DNA, have floated this theory, although there is no actual proof of it so far. The rationale was simple: Karan Kakkad and Vijay were friends and thus had a business relationship.

Vijay got pissed off with Karan because the latter was using his contacts and dealing directly with them; this way, Vijay was cut off from specific deals, leaving him with no money or commission to make. Due to this and Karan's insistence on using Simran Sood as a honey trap for his ventures, the relationship between the two soured, eventually leading to Karan Kakkad's ultimate death.

After Karan was kicked out of the duo, Vijay liked his coffee with sleeping pills and mixed some more in his food over dinner. Dhananjay and Vijay slit his throat and chopped his body up in his bathroom.

"Me and Harish are just unable to go into Karan's bedroom and bathroom; the thought of him being killed in his bathroom just scares us too much. We have been sleeping in the drawing room since we came to his flat." Rita Kakkad had

told the cops when they had come to the flat to take DNA samples and blood samples from the cracks in the tiles of his bathroom.

For Vijay, it was simple. Karan had messed up their arrangement, and he would have to pay with his life. He was robbed of his gold chains, credit cards, phone, and laptops. He would have to pay for his betrayal; it was that simple.

His BMW was snatched away from him, and all his valuables were taken from his flat. Without fear, the gang did shopping with his credit card, not only in India but also in Bangkok. This was Vijay Palande in his Underworld and Mafia avatars.

Anil Deshmukh and his PA are the other political names being thrown about; after all, it was Deshmukh's PA who had written a letter to the Maharashtra Home Department to investigate the allegations made by Vijay Palande that Deven Bharti had underworld ties and that he was farmed. Anuj Tikku's brother Samit Tikku gave two crores in bribes to Deven Bharti to let him go scot-free even when Anuj Tikku was the initial suspect in the murder case. Vijay Palande knew quite a few politicians in Mumbai and did their dirty bidding from time to time. These politicians, however, could not help Vijay in his hour of need, and most of them distanced themselves from the controversy and the crimes of Vijay Palande. No one wanted to own Palande; he was in a lonely corner. His crimes and fate, as had the law, had caught up with him.

I think making Karan into a pimp and saying that he supplied girls to politicians is a tad unfair. Model coordinators are indeed the first point of contact to get girls from Bollywood, but not all co-ordinaries do shady dealings or masquerade as pimps. Yes, there are a few who do this behind the curtain.

Karan Kakkad also enjoyed a flashy life in Mumbai in Mumbai. He stayed in a posh society in a rented flat, drove a Camera and then a BMW, wore gold chains, enjoyed the gym, and had a muse in Roslyn Khan. He was also living it up, but it requires money, and someone has to pay for it, sometimes with their blood. This is what happened to Kakkad; he was slaughtered like a pig in his bathroom, and he had to pay with his blood.

You know life is a bitch, and then you die. The Kakkad family had seen the twist in their fate with an earning member of the family murdered like this. They were finding it difficult to survive. Karan was a breed winner for the family. It was a massive loss for them, and the poor mother, Rita, still believed that Karan was alive even as she gave her blood for DNA testing.

Vijay Palande and his gang went on a killing spree and destroyed many lives in a short period.

"Vijay Palande is a classic serial killer; his gestation period, or cooling-off period, between one murder and the next, is very short, which shows he has no room for remorse or grief. His brain does not have that cognizance; he also, like most serial killers, believes that his victims deserve to die and that he has done them a favor by reliving their miserable lives.

"He had told us that Arun Tikku deserved to die. He did not give Anuj money for his day-to-day expenses. He was not a good father. He did not deserve to live." One cop told me who had interrogated Vijay for days.

"That's a classic serial killer for you; they have no remorse for their victims. I am afraid Vijay Palande has gone too far to feel remorse; he is a hardened serial killer." Even Himanshu Roy stated that in his press conference a decade ago.

The case undoubtedly exposes the nexus between the underworld, politicians, and law enforcement agencies. Nowhere is this nexus more prevalent than in Mumbai, and people like Palande were happily doing their criminal acts under the umbrella and blessings of this nexus. The killing spree

It shook the entire chain, as now everyone was a suspect and a possible murderer. No one is spared when the rumor winds fly; it's like a tornado that takes everyone with it, swirling up and down in a spiral. In Africa, they have a name for whirlwinds; they call it Amboseli. A tornado had hit the whole city, and everyone living in plush high-rise buildings was scared and restless.

Vijay Palande, for his part, had spent a decade in jail filling out RTI requests and learning about his case by asking for station diaries and his narcotics test analysis. But he still has no control over the pace of the trail or the speed of its progress; no one does, not even the judge in this case itself. There have been three judges who have heard the testimonies of witnesses at various stages of the case. The system moves on, but only some people have complete control over how fast or slow things will move. The judicial system moves at its own lazy tortoise-like pace, so getting a judgment in itself is a long haul, and even after the decision in the sessions court, Vijay can appeal to the high court, the supreme court, and even the president. So you see what a drag all this can be.

But the slow and painful toil of the esplanade sessions court proceedings had to go on and today was the turn of a certain Kadeem Jalil Qureshi, a 39-year-old construction worker from Bandra. It was his turn to take the stand.

"On April 27, 2012, I was asked to become a panch witness and taken to flat 2206 in Oberoi Springs, where I met Officer Shivalkar. One person was in a burkha, and I consented to be a witness by filling out the panchnama. Then we went into the toilet and removed soil from in-between the tiles; we sacrificed it and put it in three operating bags." Kadeem explained.

"Have you been a panch witness in any other cases?" Prashant Pandey quizzed the witness.

"I have been a panch witness in two other cases also," Kadeem explained to the defense lawyer.

"Is it true that you have criminal cases against you and don't pay income tax?" Prashant again asked Kadeem.

"Yes! I have four criminal cases against me, none of which pertain to this matter. I do not pay income tax." Kadeem replied sheepishly.

"Do you know how many floors the Oberoi Springs building has?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, I don't remember that at all," Kadeem replied hastily.

"You are also a police informer. Prashant asked, being relentless in his questioning.

"No, that is false," Kadeem replied instantly and gingerly stepped out of the witness box.

You see, Kadeem's testimony showed that the cops had returned to Karan Kakkad's flat to take soil samples between the tiles. They knew that the killers had wiped the blood off the floor with detergent and shampoo, so they looked for blood in between the tiles. That was the only way to get a DNA match and proof that Karan was cut up in his bathroom, and his body was also cut up there before it was kept in bags and transported to Chiplun in his own BMW. So Kadeem as a panch witness was a critical link; the cops had already taken the fingerprints found on the knob and handle of the bathroom, which matched Dhananjay Shinde's fingerprints. So it had been established that Dhananjay had been in the flat with Karan Kakkad before he slit his throat and cut him up. The cops said that it was decided to detach the drain trap in the bathroom, where they found coagulated blood below a 1.5-foot pipe. After conflicting reports of the murder being a mix of Palande's passion for Sood and jealousy for Kakkad,

"These murderers feel that they are clever; they try and clean all the blood on the floor, but we know better; it's between the cracks in the wall and tiles that we look for blood stains; we look for them under the drain pipe amongst the sludge, which is where we get the samples from. We knew if we looked deeply into Karan's bathroom, we would find evidence, and we finally did." PI Satadekar had explained.

One thing was evident: the cops were now determined to seal the fate of Palande and his gang. This was just too much, and that in supposedly safe high-rise buildings in the heart of Mumbai. They had slipped him one case after another and even canceled his high court bail. He was being booked for everything: a fake

passport, five murders, keeping ammunition in his house, and escaping from police custody; they wanted to keep him in jail for a very long period; if he got bail in one, he would have to fight another, and then another, and then another; there would be no respite for him.

The defense lawyers, on the other hand, had only one strategy: discredit the police and their procedure, then deny the police witnesses and discredit them as well. They were trying their best, but the gravity and number of crimes that Vijay had committed were so massive that no one wanted to let him go free. Even after several bail pleas, he was still locked up in maximum security at Tajola Jail.

The dead, Arun Tikku and Karan Kakkad were now just DNA reports that were being read out in court and dictated by people who neither knew them nor knew anything about the truth of what took place a decade ago. These living people who jumped for joy or wept with sorrow and were so dearly loved by their families are now reduced to a DNA report. They would, however, only live in the hearts and minds of their loved ones, who would never be able to move on, and something or other would always remind them about the horrors of the past.

As for the media, this was exciting and scintillating content: a serial killer, a honey trap, cocaine, gangsters, and triple murders. There was a three-part documentary on Sahara TV that spoke a lot.

About the gangster and cop nexus in the Mumbai Police. There were hot TV debates where news actors were trying to figure out the traits of a serial killer and what should be an appropriate punishment for people like that.

But even if Vijay Palande and his gang are hanged, will it bring Arun Tikku and Karan Kakkad back to life? Will it ease their pain? I think the families will still be hurt for a long time.

"Dharanjay has shaved his head and now is teaching yoga to others in jail, and as for Palande, he keeps himself busy studying documents on his case and filing RTI; he also teaches others how to find loopholes in police investigations. These mother fuckers will never change; you can't change a criminal's mind; they will remain criminals. The only solution is either to kill them in an encounter or lock them up for life." Srikant Tawde said to me once when we were coming out of court.

"We still have many witnesses to go in Karan's case, but I am glad we are making progress somehow." Ujjwal Nigam told me he was no doubt trying to give me some much-needed solace and comfort.

"But what of the unknown person, the unnamed person whose skull was discovered? Will he be convicted of that as well?" I had asked Ujjwal when we were together at the Residency Hotel in Fort.

"Well, that is a difficult case with no name or identity of the dead person. I am afraid Palande will go scot-free. This case will fall apart in court, I am afraid." Ujjwal had inferred this in advance. But we will get a conviction in Karan Kakkad's case; I am sure of that. Although we have no eyewitness to the murder itself, there is a whole lot of circumstantial evidence and DNA evidence to convict the entire gang.

The trial and the case still drag on, but till then, Vijay Palande will be spending his time in jail, no doubt still hoping that one day he will be a free man and that somehow he will be able to escape all this just the way he has run so many times in the past. He will have to wait for that, as the courts are in no mood to give him bail or any respite, and his punishment will continue. But being outside or inside the jail wouldn't matter much for a man like Vijay. He has kept up with his

The routine of doing yoga and meditation to keep his physical body fit. His body is still intact, but the bodies of his victims have rotated in the ravines of Kumbharli Ghat.

His victim's families no doubt want to see Vijay Palande's Kankal by the end of the trial, and there is no doubt they are waiting for an end to their ordeal, but they will not get any closure till the trial continues.

End Of Karan Kakkad Ke Karnamey

Kisi Ki Khopdi Kisi Ka Dhad Palande ka Fifth Victim

Introduction: This book is a pentalogy of "Yes sir, I killed my dad." It focuses on the recovery of the skull, bones, and upper body parts found in the Kumbharli Ghats, the DNA and blood analysis, and the testimony of the doctors and forensic experts in court. How the police tried to find out who the fifth victim of Vijay Palande and his gang was and whether they could have killed many more people as well, those that no one will ever know about, The progress of Case No. 705—the case of the fifth unknown victim—is what this book explores.

This book has been compiled through extensive research of case 775, the skull of the unknown victim, and through collecting and investigating all witness testimony and their statements in court, including the DNA and blood sampling done by the forensic experts.

"It's between the cracks of the tiles that one finds the blood DNA." Forensic experts

"Luck is a fleeting thing; its problem is that it soon runs out." Anuj Tikku's victim's son

"At all times, the universe only gives you the best possible result." Anuj Tikku

"Court cases are not won on truth; they are won through appeals." Prashant Pandey, defense lawyer

"The wheels of law turn slowly, but they turn for sure." Ujjwal Nigam, prosecution lawyer

Prologue

There is no doubt that Vijay Palande and his band of merry bandits were responsible for some of the most gruesome killings that Mumbai has ever seen. Still, the fact that these killings happened in plush high-rise buildings that were highly secure and guarded is indeed scarier. His victims were wealthy and affluent; these were his perfect targets; he was the rich man's serial killer; his ambitions and goals were big, and he was hungry to have what others possessed. He studied his victims diligently over some time; he won their trust slowly and steadily, and when he was sure that his victims trusted him completely, he went for the kill.

There was a lot of ho! Ha! About a skull recovered from the deep ravines of the Kumbharli Ghats. Along with eighteen bones and a large part of a man's upper body, the cops and the team of mountain trekkers also discovered a human skull in a decomposed state with some ear tissue still intact. This skull finally became the mystery of the fifth victim, as the upper body matched the DNA of Kakkad's mother, Rita, and brother Harish, but the DNA of the skull did not. Harish Kakkad even gave a media interview, saying the skull was too small to be that of his brother. He explained that its size was too small. The cops had sent it for DNA analysis, and the DNA did not match that of Karan. So then the question is: who did it belong to? Did Vijay Palande and Dhananjay kill some other person, maybe a friend of Karan's or a business partner, along with him in his flat? And what about the bones that were also recovered and thrown into the ghats tied up in black polythene bags? Only DNA could figure out what was what. Vijay Palande had also consented to a narcotics analysis test, but his answers were conclusive, and the cops could not make much of the tests; nothing of any importance came out of them.

Who was Vijay Palande's unknown fifth victim, whose skull did not match the blood DNA of Rita and Harish Kakkad? This is what the judges and lawyers were trying to figure out in case 775, in which Palande and his gang were also booked, the case of the unknown person who was also slaughtered along with Karan Kakkad.

Through case 775, we understand the strategy Vijay Palande and his defense team used to prove the entire gang's innocence; they just pinned the blame on

Anuj Tikku and blamed him for the murder of their father and came up with the two crore bribe to Deven Bharti conspiracy theory. I say theory because that's a theory, and there is no proof of that.

Chapter One: The Unknown Victim

One of the critical witnesses in case 775 who would shed light on the discovery of the skull, bones, and upper body parts discovered in Kumbharli Ghat was **PI Satardekar**, who was attached to unit nine crime branch. He was now sixty years old and retired, and a lot of time had passed since he finally took his stand, to tell the truth about the events that had unfolded in 2012.

"A case was registered on the 16th of April 2012 at the Amboli police station. The crime was registered with Unit Nine on the 18th of April 2012. Our unit received five seized articles, a written panchnama, and a cover letter from the Oshiwara police station. The panchnama was of Vijay Palande, which commenced on the 15th of April 2012 and finished on the 16th of April 2012. The five seized articles included one human skull, 18 human bones, brain fluid, fluid mixed with soil, and a control sample of soil. The Oshiwara Police told us that the skulls and bones were those of the victim, one Karan Kakkad, for whose murder an offense was registered at Amboli Police Station. On the 19th of April, I called the forensic experts, **Shri Parulekar** and **Sri Lade**, and we discussed the parcel in front of two panch witnesses. We first looked at two large bones, 19.5 cm and 24.5 cm, respectively. It was Prulekar who removed the earlobes and two teeth from the human skull, but the skull was small and decomposed; it had a horrible smell indeed. That's when Lade suggested we take it to the anatomy department of J.J. Hospital; therefore, I sealed the skull and bones again in a packet." PI Satardekar, a tall man with broad shoulders, an army-style mustache, and a husky voice told the open court in a clear and crisp voice as if the past events were unfolding in front of his very eyes.

"On the 20th of April, I sent a human skull to J.J. Hospital, requesting that they provide the ear lobes and the two teeth," Satardekar told the court that he was subsequently shown Exhibit 89 by the female clerk in court, which the P.I. acknowledged as written by him.

"On the very day we got the ear lobes and the two teeth from J.J. Hospital, which we sent to the FSL lab, On the 8th of June, we got the report that the DNA of the human skull did not match the blood samples of Rita Nand Harish Kakkad. On the 29th of April, we recovered one headless and legless body from Kumbharli Ghat; this was obtained by perusing the accused, number two, Dhananjay Shinde. It was

through the disclosure of this accuser that we found the headless and legless body. We got a report from FSL that the headless and legless body DNA matched that of Karan's mother and brother. So it was obvious that someone else, apart from Karan Kakkad, was also murdered, as the DNA of the skull and bones did not match Rita and Harish Kakkad. It was then that I lodged the report about the murder of some unknown person." PI Satardekar said, his voice now quivering with fear and the tension of the situation when he first discovered this fact.

"Can you identify the photographs of the skull, bone, and torso if shown to you?" Prashant Pandey from the defense team got up to ask his questions to the P.I.

"Yes, I definitely can," Satardekar said, approvingly nodding.

The court clerk now showed him exhibit 97, which was a bunch of photographs of decomposed skull bones and earlobes, along with the two teeth. "Yes, these are the photographs of the body parts sent to the FSL Lab," Satardekar said confidently.

"Are you sure all eighteen bones are there?" Atul Pandey asked with force.

"Yes, all eighteen, along with the two large bones and the two teeth, along with the ear lobes, there was some flesh, but that was stored separately with fluid." The P.I. explained to the court He had looked at the photographs long enough to get a puny feeling in his gut. He cringed briefly and then started drinking water to regain his composure.

"Did you present the accused Vijay Palande in the magistrate's court for remand?" Atul Pandey further probed the P.I.

"Yes, I did for the crime registered at the Amboli police station, crime no. 42/12. I also mentioned in the remand application that I have to quiz the accused in another case." Satardekar said calmly.

"How long have you been with Unit Nine of the Crime Branch?" Atul Pandey grunted.

"From 2010 to 2014, I was with them over four years." PI Satardekar replied coolly.

"Do you maintain log books and station diaries diligently?" Atul Pandey asked, trying to poke holes in police procedures and find mistakes in their paperwork.

"Yes, we maintain station diaries and a log book for the two jeeps we used to solve this case: a white Scorpio and a brown Bolero Jeep. The crime was first registered with Amboli Police and then transferred to us at Unit Nine later." Satardekar explained the defect.

"Did you visit the place of the occurrence of the offense in the said crime?" Now it was Prashant Pandey's turn to probe the PI.

"Yes, we did from the 16th of April to the 26th of April 2012." PI Satardekar affirmed.

"Did you take the weight off the skull and bones found in the Ghats?" Prashant asked.

"No, I did not take their weight," PI replied hastily.

"Was any post-mortem report made of the bones and skeletons?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No post-mortem was done on the bones, but DNA revealed that the bones were not of a human but of an animal," Satardekar replied.

"Did you also give an interview to Pooja Changowalia of Hindustan Times at the behest of Devan Bharti? Now, Vijay Palande got up to ask.

"No, that is not true; I did not give any interviews." The PI replied instantly.

"You, ahem, mentioned that you sealed the bins yourself. Have you sealed the bones?" The accused, Vijay Palande, continued with his cross.

"No, I did not seal them myself; my assistant did that," Satardekar explained.

"You lodged the FIR for the third murder of the unknown person two months later; why was that?" Vijay went for the kill.

"I sent the two teeth and earlobes for DNA testing, and when I got the test report that they did not match with the DNA of Rita and Harish Kakkad, I lodged an FIR for another murder, the murder of an unknown person," Satardekar replied gleefully.

"When and how did you know that the bones were not of a human but an animal?" Vijay Palande asked.

"I got a certificate issued by Dr. Vaishali Bodge from the Anatomy Department of Garant Medical College, and it was clearly stated that the bones were not of a human but of an animal, and there were no injury marks on them," Satardekar replied and then slowly stepped down from the witness stand. There were no more questions to be asked of him.

The cleverness and skullduggery of Vijay Palande came to light when **Uresh Chutardhari Singh**, aged thirty-seven, got up to give his testimony. He was a panch witness and part of the police team that took Vijay Palande back to Satara and Kumbharli Ghat in a bid to find the torso and remains of Karan Kakkad that he had thrown into the ravine. Vijay fooled the cops and pointed to a black bag full of animal bones and a human skull that was not the skull of Kakkad. He knew that from before, and to fool the cops and confuse the investigation, he took the cops to an unknown person's skull and animal bones. He knew that when DNA was done, neither the skull nor the eighteen bones would match the DNA of Kakkad's family. It was only when the cops interrogated Dhananjay Shinde separately and took him individually to the ghats that he pointed to the right remains of Kakkad and his torso, which had no head or legs.

"I was having tea on the 15th of April 2012; it was around 6:00 pm when a constable, Santosh Satose, called me to the police station. Shri Patil informed me that an offense bearing CR No. 105/12 was registered at the Amboli Police Station, and they asked me to become panch witness, to which I agreed." Uresh explained in a crisp, clean voice to the judge.

"The police pointed at the accused, and he told me his name was Vijay Bhimaraoji Palande. He told me that he, along with an associate, Dhananjay Shinde, murdered Karan Kakkad, who lived in flat 2206 in the Oberoi Springs building. He said that they had cut up the bodies and thrown them into the ghats in polythene bags and a suitcase." Uresh's voice quivered as he said this, and his body twitched nervously.

Pure carnal fear can be overpowering: the darkness, the smell, the severed heads, the skulls, the human bones and rotting tissues, the gore, the pus, blood, the rotting earlobes, the dismembered torsos. It was like the tale from the cave or a burning pyre in a Shamshan full of aghodis. The dance of death is written large on the face of the story and the case. A rhythmic dance of death and mayhem was too much for the audience sitting in the court to absorb, and there were uncomfortable faces all around, especially when the photographs and other exhibits were shown in court. It was cringe-worthy. It was bizarre, real yet unreal, given the twisted nature of this case and the blood that was spilled.

Uresh was shown the panchnama, and he acknowledged the signature as his. "The accused said that they had cut up Karan's body in his bathroom and then put it into suitcases and black polythene bags, which they put in his BMW car and then drove till Kumbharli Ghat to dispose of it." Uresh then pointed at the accused, Vijay Palande, in court.

"Vijay said that he was ready to show the police the spot where he had thrown the cut-up body of Karan Kakkad," Uresh said further.

"Then we took an Innova vehicle, and along with the accused, we drove towards Kumbharli Ghat; the accused was guiding us all along. We took the link road via the Andheri flyover, Sakinaka, Powai, and Pune Highway No. 4 to Umbraj Bridge. We reached Kumbharli Ghats at 8:00 am through the Ratnagiri Highway. At the 7th turn of the highway, Vijay stopped the vehicle and got out of it. He then posted to a Khai and said that he had thrown the chest portion of the body there.

We saw the Khai; it was intense, almost 300 feet deep, so we returned." Uresh recalled

"The accused then took us 10 feet below into the khai till we came to a wall, and he said he had thrown the head and the legs from the wall into the Khai. He said that the black bag with the head was thrown a bit deep into the ravine and posted in that direction. We then moved towards the checkpoint after the seventh turn. At the checkpoint, three policemen joined us: Bhagwat, Janwalker, and Dhadashi. They said that we should come and meet their superior, Sampat Shinde and that Oshiwara Police had informed them of the murder. At 10 am, Sampat Shinde came in a police vehicle to the checkpost. Sampat and five people from the Katari Samaj are local tribal people who live near the Ghats and Chiplun. Sampat told us that some people of the Khatri Samaj had collected the pieces of the body parts from the deep places in the Khai. The Khatri Samaj people went deep into the Khai, but it was very steep; they collected some bones and came out after three hours of solid search." Uresh spoke firmly.

"After that, the local police called the Sahyandri Adventure Trackers and asked them to come to the spot to help with the search of the body parts thrown by Vijay Palande and his bloody gang.

The Katari Samaj was able to open the black bag, which had a severed head in it. It smelled awful and foul, but we opened it and saw its contents." Uresh explained that his throat was growing parched, and his eyes went heavy; he almost shook with perspiration. The visions of that day must have come gushing back to him in front of his many eyes.

"We saw that both eyes on the skull were decomposing, and pus formed inside the eye socket. There was hair on the head, and some ear lobes were still attached to the head. The teeth were also visible from the outside. The police

called a doctor with hand gloves, a glass bottle, a container box, and spray." Uresh explained this to the court in detail.

"So when did the trekkers arrive then?" Prashant Pandey from the defense team asked

"Well, at 4:00 pm on the 7th turn of the ghat, a team of ten trekkers from Sahyandri Trackers came; their team leader was one Sanjay Madhukar. They went into the khai with the help of ropes and then collected all the remaining human bones. We then took the bins to the 7th turn, where a doctor awaited us. The doctor was Yatin Mayekar, and he said that the bones were off-human and packed all the eighteen bones in a container with the skull in another box." Uresh said he was getting further into the gory details.

"We even took soil samples with blood and pus from the area and sealed the containers; we then labeled them each. The police took photographs of the container and bottles and prepared the panchnama before the witnesses." Uresh said, and as if on cue, the court clerk started showing him the container full of eighteen bones and the one with the skull teeth and ear lobes in the bottle, one by one. Uresh identified it by pointing his finger towards it. As also shown in police photographs with the skull in the black polite bags, along with teeth and earlobes shot, one by one, the witness identified the said articles and exhibits.

"So what is your business then? What do you do?" Prashant Pandey asked the witness

"I run a business selling second-hand cars in Behram Bag in Jogeshwari. I had a rented office and worked there with my nephew." Uresh replied truthfully.

"Do you remember the mobile number you were using in 2012?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, I do not remember its number," said Uresh.

The defense lawyers kept huffing and puffing, blaming it on the police, saying that the witnesses had been vetted by the police in advance and had been forced by the cop to give testimony to gainsay the accused. That station diary entries had been manipulated to glorify Vijay Palande and his gang. Devan Bharti had instructed the junior officers to take Vijay to task, and they had also tampered with the evidence. Their strategy was simple: blame the shoddy police investigation and lapses in police work. But these were mainly allegations with no solid proof. If that didn't work, then the following strategy was to discredit the witnesses, find past criminal cases or convictions that the witnesses had, and try to show the court that the witnesses were not morally good people, that they could lie in court under oath, and that what they said in court could not be relied upon. The defense lawyers used this strategy whenever a new witness took the stand. They had spoken sh*t about the Kakkad family and the Tikku family, and they were doing it with all the other essential witnesses.

However, this could not remove the mountains of evidence against Vijay Palande and his gang that the courts were staring at. Even the high court, while canceling Palande's bail, stated that they were grieved by the fact that the police had not fought the Swaraj Das and Anup Das cases more vigorously and had not opposed the bail of Palande in 2007 when he got bail for the second time. The courts were not on Vijay's side that much, as was clear; they had also rejected Palande's appeal for a speedy trial and refused to drop charges against Simran Sood as a co-conspirator. It was simple; they had done it many times, and now no one was buying their truth. It was not that the victims of Vijay Palande were morally better than him and did not have a dark side of their own; it was just that Vijay's acts were very dark and gruesome. As human beings, we all have a dark side; we have all done something or something else that can be considered harmful or a crime. People are corrupt in their own way; some save tax illegally, some smoke pot, some have gotten parking tickets or gone to jail for drunk driving, some may have been involved in bar fights or brawls, or they may have beaten their wives. We all have done something or the other in our lives that we are not proud of, but murder is a different league; it's a heinous crime, and Vijay had been booked for

five murders. These are the ones that we know of, but there must be others that we will never know about.

Chapter Two: The Forensic's Testimony

Evidence: pure hard facts, timelines, clues, reports, paperwork, files, and more reports. The cycle goes on; it's that simple. These are court proceedings, very process-oriented and very clerical. Hard copy and soft copy, along with affidavits and more facts. It just goes on, the circus goes on, as the victims and their families lament the absurdity of it all, with appeals and more appeals. Getting justice in our country is like going round and round; it's endless and never-ending. Eleven years have passed, and we have just reached the halfway point in both the Karan Kakkad and Arun Tikku cases. As for the case of the unknown person whose skull was recovered by the police, the system has still not given a name to Vijay's fifth victim, and it seems that no one will ever know. Most experts believe he will get away in case 775, as there are no clues, witnesses, or names. There is no way he will be booked in this case. Case 775 is the weakest of the three murder cases Vijay is fighting. It is as if the killer is mocking the cops and the judges alike, saying, "Come on, if you can catch me. He is mocking the justice system and telling everyone that he has killed a man who is nameless and faceless. In his devious way, he is playing a game with the justice system, showing them how, with his wits, he has been able to escape the law for such a long time, and in his mind, he thinks he can get away even now.

"It is not that cut and dry; you should know Palande was only convicted for one of the Das murders, and his associate in this crime, David, was acquitted in both murders. He can escape conviction even now; at least, he thinks he can." I had told Kadam once during our many conversations.

"Don't demotivate me, Anuj Ji. We are working hard to get the witnesses; convincing them and their families to come and take the stand is not easy. We want him convicted and hanged for good." Kadam had said it in a somewhat sad tone.

The courts are strange institutions where the guardians of the law are covered in black robes, and the criminals are dressed in white. Where no judge wants to give a judgment because he fears his superiors might pull him up if he is wrong, he leaves it to the next judge to pass an order, which itself adds to further delay, so by the time a case comes to an end, many judges have presided over the same issue and case.

"The slow progress of the case is such that by the time a verdict comes, Vijay would have probably finished one life sentence." I had said this to Kadam once.

"No life sentence means life without parole; you remain in jail till your natural death; that's what life is," Kadam explained that it was as if he were basting about his vast knowledge of the law.

"No, life means twenty or even twenty-five years, that's all." Abu Salem has got 25 years; he will be out of jail by 2030, and Jessica's killer, that Manu Sharma guy, has got twenty years in prison. He just got out recently." I explained to Kadam, showing him that I, too, had done my research in law.

Delays, adjournments, fights between lawyers, more delays—it's a grind. I am lucky I had to come to court for four days, and my testimony was through." You know Simran comes to the proceedings yearly; the court has refused to drop charges against her, and we have also impounded her passport so she does not leave the country. She has put on weight now, but her jhatkas and nakhras are the same; something's never changed. She comes in skirts and sneakers sometimes to the police station also." Kadam had filled me in to verify Simran.

For Karan Kakkad's folks, it has been worse. First, they did not get the body of Karan to do his last rites; they just got a piece of his torso. No, BMC gave them a death certificate for Karan. They suffered financially due to Karan's sudden death, as he was partly the breadwinner for the family. They had to spend much time and money going back and forth from Delhi to Mumbai for the case.

On top of that, due to the lack of a death certificate, they were not able to get any of the money in Karan's bank accounts. Vijay had robbed all the valuable belongings of their son, and they were left with nothing. On top of that, their case had progressed at a snail's pace, and the family is undoubtedly unhappy with the justice system and its tedious processes.

Now it was the turn of **Kadeem Jalil Qureshi**, thirty-nine, a construction worker and a panch witness in case 775. It was he who came forward to give his testimony.

"Sir, on April 27 April 27, 2012, at around 1:00 pm, while I was proceeding towards my house near Oberoi Society, one constable approached me and requested that I act as a panch witness. I consented, and the constable then took me to the 22nd floor of the Oberoi Springs Building Society. I saw one person in a black borkha, and then I met PI Shivalkar, who requested that I act as a panch witness. We rang the bell of Flat 2206, and the person who came out was Harish Kakkad. PI Shivalkar informed him that they were going to prepare a panchnama. The flat had two bedrooms and one hall. We also made the panchanama of the toilet, and then doctors came from Kalina; they had instruments and were wearing gloves. There are now four of us in the flat. The accused number two took us to the toilet, and the doctors scraped the tiles and took the soil between the tiles and the gaps between them; they put this soil inside three pouches." Kadeem explained to the court

On cue, he was shown exhibit 188, the prepared panchnama with his signature. The witness acknowledged the document in court.

"Is it true that you have criminal cases against you?" Atul Pandey asked the witness:

"Yes, I have four criminal cases against me. I was in Arthur Road jail after the first criminal case." Kadeem replied, feeling a bit embarrassed, saying this in an open court.

"Do you pay income tax? Have you been a panch witness before? Pandey thundered

"No, I don't pay income tax or GST." I operate alone and work on my own." Kadeem replied now, regaining his composure a bit.

"How many facts are there on the 22nd floor?" Prashant Pandey now asks:

"I don't know that," Kadeem replied

"Did you get bail in these criminal cases?" Prashant Pandey tried to embarrass Kadeem further.

"Yes, I got bail in all four cases and would also go to Bandra station to sing on the register," Kadeem replied.

"You are giving this testimony at the behest of the police; you are not a construction worker but a police informer." Atul Pandey tried to intimidate the witness.

"No, that is not true; I am a construction worker and not an informant to the police," Kadeem replied, and soon his time was up. He slowly exited the stand and sat on the chair beside him.

The court needed to understand the chain of events and their chronology one by one through the eyes of the witnesses to be able to understand the gravity of the crime and how it had finally been perpetrated. Each witness was like a brick in the wall, a new jig in a jigsaw puzzle, a piece of Lego that would help construct the crime brick by brick as it happened. The timing, the people, and the truth all had to be sweated together as most of the evidence was circumstantial in the case; only the Arun Tikku murder case had actual eyewitnesses who saw the murder and the crime take place live in front of their very eyes. In the Karan Kakkad case and the unknown person's murder case, there were no eyewitnesses.

To understand what might have happened and the timing of the events, witness testimony was crucial to establishing the chain of events. The job of the defense was to challenge this chain and discredit it. If one piece in the chain falls or is found to be unsure, the whole chain falls apart. Circumstantial evidence falls apart. The defense was looking for loopholes in the prosecution's chain; that was the only way to win the case.

Then came the front of **Dr. Vaishali Bondge**, a 46-year-old professor from Hospital Campus Byculla. It was her turn to take the stand, which she duly did.

"The year was 2012, and I was an assistant professor in the anatomy department of J.J. Hospital. On April 20 April 20, I got a letter from the crime branch unit nine asking me to examine bone parts." Vaishali told the judge

The witness was shown exhibit 89 by the female clerk in court, which Vaishali posted as the letter she had received for the bone examination.

"There was also a cardboard box that had a human skull, partly decomposed left ear lobes, and a cervical vertebra. I then cut down the soft tissues of the decomposed ear lobes and took out two premolar teeth from the skull and the cervical vertebra I sent for DNA analysis. The skull I kept for maceration." Vaishali explained in detail how the bone examination was done.

"What is the meaning of maceration?" Atul Pandey asked.

"Maceration is when organized tissue is transformed into intact cells; it makes the skin tissue soft, moist, and soggy." Dr. Vaishali informed the defense lawyer.

"The second box contained sixteen bites that were not of a human being. I sent my report to the police on April 22nd. My reply is in exhibit 89, which is in the court." Vaishali said.

"So what was your report then?" Atul Pandey got up to ask.

"Well, the skull belongs to a human being; the sex is probably male, and the age of the deceased is over twenty-five. The decomposed ear lobes also belong to a human being. The bones are not of humans but animals, but there are no injury marks on the bones." Vaishali explained the entire girl's analysis to the court.

"What did you do with the premolar tooth and the ear lobes?" now Vijay Palande got up to ask.

"I handed them over in a brown pouch to Nisar Shaikh, a police head constable; it was sent to the anatomy department, and they acknowledged receiving it." Doctor Vaishali explained

"How long have you been working at the Department of Anatomy?" Palande probed further.

"For eighteen years, I have not been a forensic physical anatomy, pathology, or odontology specialist. I am an MS, and in 2012, I was an assistant professor. I did not conduct any post-mortem, but I used to direct dead bodies to teach the students. In a year, we would direct twenty-five bodies." Vaishali expelled Vijay Palande, who looked excited to ask her more questions.

"Is it then correct to say that for unclaimed, unidentified human bodies and skeleton remains, the body samples have to be preserved for pathology, chemical analysis, and DNA analysis as per protocol?" Vijay Palande asked, trying to show that he was well-versed in the scientific aspect of the doctor's testimony.

"I cannot explain any further detail; we only give our opinion regarding the bones and skeleton and can tell the age and sex of the skull." Doctor Vaishali explained calmly.

"Are you aware of how the body parts, muscle tissue, teeth, hair, and bones are to be collected and preserved so they can be sent for DNA analysis?" Vijay Palande threw another salvo from his side, trying to confuse the witness and point out holes in the sample collection procedure that was followed.

"We do not store body parts in our department. We directly handed the parts to the police without tampering with them." Vaishali explained confidently.

"Is it true that a textbook written by Jai Singh P. Moore is prescribed for forensic analysis and is the standard book and authority in this field?" Palande had done his research. Being in an Andam cell for eleven years gave him enough time to research and study the case. For him, it was a matter of life and death, and he was fighting tooth and nail, just like my poor father was fighting for this life. Each witness's testimony is like a sham jab and stab at his conscience and his psyche. With every witness, he is getting closer and closer to his doom and death. The man had no option but to fight his case with all his might, and he was clearly doing just that in court. Probing every witness with questions and attacking them if need be. He was doing his perspiration before coming to court, that was for sure.

"Yes, I know that book but did not read it fully," Vaishali replied rather irritably to Palande's question, which she felt was irrelevant.

"How did you preserve, store, and wrap the bones, tissue, and skull then?" Vijay went further, trying to keep his rhythm going.

"According to the collection procedure, the teeth and hair with roots were wrapped in dry paper and cloth. As for bones, completely burned bones and ash are not useful in analysis. The 100 grams of tissue were put in a clean glass bottle and plastic containers. The tissue samples are preserved in formalin." Doctor Vaishali informed the court, answering Vijay Palande directly.

"Did you keep an outward and inward register for all the DNA evidence collected?" Vijay asked the doctor.

"Yes, we did, and the register is in court," Vaishali replied.

"Is it true to say that whatever articles you received were not packed and sealed as per protocol?" Vijay Palande tried to point out holes in the collection protocol.

"The articles were packed and sealed per protocols," Vaishali said confidently.

"There are seven vertebrae in the human neck; you have not mentioned the number in the report. Why is that? Vijay asked the doctor some way, trying to needle her and disorient her to give a vague answer and further muddle her testimony.

"The clerk signed the report. I did not check why a number was not mentioned on the report." Vaishali, the good doctor, explained

"Do you know about the Maharashtra Civil Code and hospital administration manual issued by the directorate of health services in Maharashtra?" Vijay kept his pressure on.

"Yes, I am aware of such a manual." Doctor Vaishali gave a straight answer.

"Is it true that you did not follow the process as specified in the manual and did not give the correct receipts?" You tampered with the articles at the behest of the police?" Vijay thundered.

"No, that is not true; we followed all procedures, and no pressure was put on me or my HOD to tamper with evidence to give an incorrect and false report." Doctor Vaishali kicked off and fought back.

"How many teeth were in the skull when you first inspected it?" Vijay asked; he was in no mood to relent.

"There were thirty-two teeth in the skull; we took two premolars for DNA analysis; the third molar was impacted. I also took two photographs of the skull, which was given to the police." The doctor replied

"Do you know the Mumbai Anatomy Act, and did you get permission from the HOD for your analysis?" Vijay Palande asked.

"Yes, I know about the said act, and I did get all permissions from my HOD." Vaishali gave a prompt reply.

"Did you send the bones for analysis to FSL directly?" Vijay asked, not backing off.

"No, I handed the articles to the police, and they sent them to FSL," Vaishali explained.

"Do you know which animals the bones belonged to then?" Vijay Palande further asked:

"I do not know which animal they belonged to; I know they are not human bones; they were also scorched and did not have any tissues." Vaishali gave out all the gory details.

"How did you mark the bones then? Palande asked

"I gave the bones and the skull a MLC number. I wrote the number with a marker on each bone, including the animal bones." Vaishali answered like a true professional.

"What could be the upper limit of the age of the person with the unknown skull?" Now Prashant Pandey

"The upper age limit could be forty years, not more than that," Vaishali replied confidently about her analysis.

"Did the skull have any hair on the scalp?" Prashant Pandey, the lawyer for the defense team, asked forcefully.

"I do not remember that, but there was soil on the decomposed skull, and we did a PH analysis of the soil." Dr. Vaishali replied.

"Is it not true that a dental analysis is very important for age determination of the skull? Did you do any dental analysis?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, we did not do any dental analysis, and I have not sent the skull to the odontology department." Dr. Vaishali replied.

"The dentition and teeth identify the death and age of the skeletal remains. Is the dental profiling available?" Vijay Palande now stood up again to do the cross.

"Yes, this is useful for superimposing the identification of the dead person. However, in our hospital, this is not available." Doctor Vaishali replied

Then, the court clerk showed the doctors photographs of the skull and its dental details. Vaishali took the pictures and scrutinized them.

"Can you see in the photograph, article 20, that molars 17 and 32 are missing in the lower jaw?" Vijay asked the doctor after a long pause.

"The two molars are impacted; I cannot see them," Vaishali replied after considering the question.

"After how many days after death do the teeth of the skull become loose?" Vijay asked, wanting to be specific. "After three to five days," Vaishali replied, stepping down from the stand.

Chapter Three: Discovery of the Skull and Bones

Criminals have their ways, but so do cops." It is the way the crime branch unit nine did its interrogations that finally led to the discovery of the skull's bones and the upper body of Kakkad. We interrogated all the accused separately, so for the discovery of the body parts, we took Dhananjay and Vijay individually to Chiplun and Kumbharli Ghats. We knew Palande was clear and would take us on a wild goose chase, which he did, but Dhananjay, who is a novice and a dud, was the one who took us to the remains of Karan Kakkad. We also have our methods of finding out the truth." Kadam had told me as we were discussing the case.

'So how did you guys discover Karan's mortal remains?'" I had asked him. "I think the testimony of PI Sanjay Shivaji Rao More will shed much light on that," Kadam replied.

It was now **Sanjay Shivaji Rao More's** turn to take the stand. The tall, dark PI was fifty years old and attached to Gargoti in Kolhapur.

"In April 2012, I was attached to Oshiwara Police Station. I was working in the detection branch when the Arun Tikku murder case was registered with us (CR No. 105/2012). PI Sharad Patil was investigating that crime and Vijay Bhivajirao Palande was accused in that case of the murder of the senior citizen, the sixty-seven-year-old Arun Tikku. In the evening, the accused showed willingness to state around 6:30 pm. We got two ranch witnesses for his statement: Deepak Trivedi and Uresh Singh. The accused told the ranch witnesses that he was willing to show us where he had thrown the body in Kumbharli Ghats; thus, a panchnama was prepared, and it was duly signed by the accused in front of the witnesses." Sanjay Shivaji Rao told the court

"Objection, me lord, the witness is neither a signatory nor the author of the panchnama. Hence, he cannot identify the signature on the document." Atul Pandey thundered and objected.

"Objection overruled the witness superior, who was also present; Sharad Patil was also a peasant then. Thus, the objection is overruled." Said Judge Hake, overruling the defense objection, much to the dissatisfaction of Atul Pandey, who had just shaken his head and sank back into his chair.

"I then called for a white Innova, the panch witness, four constables, PI Patil, and I then moved towards the ghats; all the while, the accused Vijay Palande was giving directions to us. When we approached Kumbharli Ghats, the accused asked us to stop the vehicle at the 7th turn of the ghat at the ghat mata. Vijay told us that he had thrown the headless body and other parts into the valley around three hundred meters deep. He told us that he had thrown the head and other parts of the body some distance away. We thought we needed help, so we came to Ghat Mata police chow to get help from ASI Bhagwat. He told us that the police station Argali Shrigaon is near. We took the number of API Sampat Shinde, whose staff came to our rescue and help. They got five people from Katari Samaj who went into the valley but could not go very deep. They told us they had seen the bones at a distance. After that, we went near the 10th turn again, and the Samaj people went down the valley. They informed us that there was a human skull there. At noon or so, they got the skull to us; its teeth were intact, the left earlobe was present, there was pus in the eye socket, and some hair on the scalp." Sanjay Shivaji explains how he lived through the horror and darkness of those days. As the audience in the court heard his spine-chilling testimony, people cringed; some closed their eyes; some turned the other way, not wanting to see any more of the blood or the killing of flesh; it was all too gory and dark.

"So when did you call the trekking group then?" Prashant Pandey wanted to know.

"Well, on the 7th turn, when the Katari Samaj people could not go down further, we called the trekking group from Mahabaleshwar, and they helped us from then on. Then, we called a doctor from Chiplun, who confirmed that the skull was human. He operated on the liquid in the eyes and then kept the skull in a separate carton. We finally got the bones, which were kept and sealed separately." Sanjay More explained this to the defense team lawyer.

"Can you identify these body parts in exhibits d to me? Are you aware the police took these photographs of the body parts and skull?" Prashant Pandey wanted to know and waved the photograph exhibits in front of Sanjay Rao More.

"Yes, I can; these are the pictures of the skull bones and body parts." Sanjay pointed towards the photographs and explained them to the judge.

"Do you maintain an officer's daily diary?" Now, Vijay Palande got up to do the cross-examination of the witness.

"Yes, I maintain a personal diary, and we also have a station diary we keep for the record." Sanjay More explained

"Is it true that you were due to be transferred from Oshiwara Police Station?" Vijay Palande wanted to know.

"No, I was not going to be transferred; that is false." Sanjay thundered.

"When Vijay Palande, the accused, was arrested in the Arun Tikku Murder case, did you jot that in the station diary? Prashant Pandey, the defense lawyer, now asked:

"No, I did not do a diary entry; that was the job of IO Sharad Patil." Replied Sanjay More

"While arresting the accused, did IO Sharad Patil follow the directions of the honorable court?" Prashant Pandey asked the witness.

"Yes, he did, although there is no written document of my superiors directing me to assist PI Sharad Patil," replied Sanjay More.

"What is the travel distance between the 36th Metropolitan Court and Oshiwara Police Station?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"After maybe fifteen to twenty minutes, whenever an FIR is registered, it is immediately sent to the magistrate in court. The magistrate then signs on the said FIR." Sanjay More explained the entire process of registering an FIR in detail to the defense lawyers.

"But did you make any diary entries after registering the Arun Tikku Murder case?" Now, Atul Pandey got up to ask.

"No, I did not, but I came to know that the accused was wanted for another such offense in the Karan Kakkad murder case as well." Sanjay Further said

"Who was the owner of the white Innova you used?" Prashant Pandey now asks:

"No, I do not know the owner of the Innova." Replied Sanjay More

"Do you know what lockup the accused was kept in?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, I do not remember that." More replied.

"You did not go with the accused to find the body parts; this is just a made-up story to frame my client." Prashant Pandey said, thumping the desk.

"No, that is not true." Vijay Palande was very much with us." More replied in complete confidence.

"What was your mobile number in 2012, and do you know anything about the tower location? Asked Prashant Pandey.

"My phone number was 9821583560, and I had audio and video facilities at that time. We get tower location from where the call is made and from where it is received." More explained to one court

"Did you draw a sketch map of the location at Kumbharli Ghats?" Prashant wanted to know more.

"No, I did. Make no sketch map of the location; the distance between Mumbai and Kumbharli Ghats is 450 kilometers. We did to and from the ghats; I did not pay any fuel bill for the Innova or make any station diary entries for the travel." More was said crisply.

"What is the distance from the 7th turn to the 10th turn? Can you tell the court?" Prashant Pandey stood up and asked

"Yes, it is about 2.5 km, but I am just estimating that. We stayed in the Valley View Hotel in Ghat Mata. I have, however, not bought the panchnama and medical report of the accused in court today.

"Did you ask the panache witness if they had also acted as panache witnesses?" Now Atul Pandey asked:

"No, I did not do that." More replied

"Did you get permission from the magistrate to handcuff the accused?" Prashant Pandey further probed

"Yes, I did take his permission." Sanjay More stood on his feet.

Then, the court clerk got up to show the witness exhibit 124, which was the signature of PI Sharad Patil on the panchnama. "Yes, this has been signed by Sharad Sahib," Sanjay explained, pointing out that the

"There is an overwriting between the words Darichya and Ghatachya. Can you explain this overwriting?" Prashant Pandey asked, waving his hand at the witness.

"No, I am not aware of any overwriting of the atlas; I have not done that." More replied, somewhat irritated at being cornered by the defense lawyers in such a way.

"Was the tracker team paid by the police for their services?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, they did it for charity. After all, a murder had taken place. I did take photographs of all the trekkers and the Katkari Samaj people, and I can show that to the court." More said and handed over the photographs to the court clerk, who received them.

"Is it not true that Anuj Kumar Tikku, the son of Arun Kumar Tikku, was also taken for a medical examination by a constable Mane to the copper hospital, and by the orders of the superior officers, that fact has been deleted from the station diaries?" Prashant Pandey went for the jugular. This way, the defense wanted to prove their theory that I was arrested with Vijay Palande and Dhananjay at Chiplun Farm House and handed over to Constable Mane, who had stopped me as a co-accused and taken me for medical examination as well. All I can say is that there was a half-truth in this allegation; it was confirmed that I was found in Chiplun and taken to Mumbai. But after being interrogated, I was taken off the suspect list. I did have my fingerprints taken, but I was taken to Cooper Hospital to collect my father's body and then create it. I was there at the Oshiwara station for questioning, that's all.

"Was not Anuj Kumar Tikku's custody given to you by unit eight DCB CID Deepak Laxman Phatangle?" Is it incorrect that the police destroyed the arrest panchnama of Anuj Tikku upon the directions of Deven Bharti and senior inspector Deepak Phatangle?" Atul Pandey threw his question at the witness.

"No, that is not true, and I do not remember which officer arrested Anuj Tikku."
Replied Sanjay More

"Did you take CCTV footage of the toll plaza between the Mumbai and Pune highways?" Atul asked the witness.

"No, I don't remember taking the footage." More replied patiently.

"Did you check the mileage of the Innova and how many kilometers you traveled?" Atul Pandey asked Sanjay More

"No, I did not check the mileage." Replied Sanjay More

"Do you remember the name of the photographer who photographed the skull and bones? Atul Pandey asked.

"No, I don't remember the name." Replied Sanjay More

"Who were your senior officers in the Arun Tikku Murder case?" Atul Pandey asked.

"My senior officers were Additional Police Commissionaire Deven Bharti and Deepak Phatangre." More replied.

"You are lying to the court; you filed a false charge sheet and created a false panchnama; you are also deposing false testimony at the instance of your superiors to save the main accused, Anuj Tikku, is it not?" Atul Pandey was now digging the knife right into the belly of Sanjay More as if egging him on to fumble and make a mistake out of pressure and nervousness.

"No, that is false and untrue; my testimony is true and unbiased." More replied bluntly.

"You detained Simran Sood with her dog Chihuahua along with jewelry and a Nikon camera at the directions of Deven Bharti. Is that true?" Atul went further with his line of questioning.

"No, I did not take instructions from Deven Bharti; that is false." Sanjay More replied.

"You detained Gautam Umesh Vora and Simran Sood illegally just by tracking the tower IDs of their calls?" Atul Pandey asked.

"No, that is not true at all." Sanjay More replied.

"Can you state from where you arrested the accused, Dhananjay, Simran, Vijay, and Anuj Tikku?" Atul wanted to know.

"No, I do not remember that." Sanjay More replied.

It was clear from the questioning and tone of the defense lawyers that Vijay and Simran held an intense grudge and groused against Devan Bharti and me. Their stand was that they had been made the accused because of Bharti. When I was looking for the real culprit, I saw who had refused to give the five lakh rupee deposit, and I gave the supari to Manoj and Dhananjay to kill my dad so that then I could become the owner of his wealth. That is a good conspiracy theory, to say the least, but not entirely true, as neither my cousin Samit Tikku nor I gave any bribe of Rs 2 crore to Deven Bharti to let me go scot-free. It was Himanshu Roy who proclaimed me innocent in the press conference itself. But since Bharti

arrested Vijay and he could not cut a deal with the officer, Vijay holds a deep grudge against Bharti, which came out repeatedly as the trial progressed.

Vijay would often get irritated; he even said so to Ujjwal Nigam: "Please," Please, you have prepped the witness; he looks directly at you to answer; this is not a fair trial." Vijay had barked when I took the witness stand; he was flustered, and the frustration of being in a six-to-six cell was also getting to him. I could feel the irritation and frustration occasionally in his talks and mannerisms. Though he wanted to hide these emotions, they cropped up spontaneously during his time in court. He is a serial killer, but at the same time, he is a human with flesh, bones, and feelings. No one enjoys being in jail, and given the kind of life he was living before the incident, jail must be a very comfortable place for Vijay Palande. His lawyers were gunning for Bharti and trying to poke holes in the process of the investigation. This was the standard defense strategy, as I saw it throughout the case.

"Police officers in Oshiwara Police Station work in two shifts and maintain a two-shift register; are you aware of that?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"Yes, that is true; we do maintain shift registers." Sanjay More said he was getting bored now as the questions were routine.

"Where are the accused kept after an FIR is made?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"They are kept in the Andheri lockup; if we need their custody, we must make a requisition to the lookup Thana in charge." Sanjay More explained

"Did you make a requisition to take accused Vijay Palande from the Andheri lockup on April 14th and 15th?" Prashant Pandey further asked:

"No, I don't remember that, and I don't know who the Andheri lockup in charge was in April." Sanjay More looked tired and jaded; he had been on the stand all day, and it was late evening.

"You also kept Gautam Vora illegal and tampered with Simran Sood's mobile phone; is that true? Now, Vijay Palande got up to ask his questions.

"No, that is not true," Sanjay replied.

"Do you remember the buckle numbers of the constables who arrested me and the other accused?" Can you show diary entries off to the constables?" Vijay asked, trying to corner me.

"No, I don't remember their buckle numbers." Sanjay More stood his ground.

Now I replied why, for the past five years, Vijay Palande had been filing more than 25 RIT requests asking for station diaries and the names of the constables. He wanted to show the judge that the station's diaries had been manipulated or not maintained. This was done solely to frame him and point the blame for the murders at him and his gang.

"Who informed the family of the accused number one about his arrest in the murder case? Prashant Pandey asked.

"It was Sharad Patil; he had given letters and intimations to Vijay Palande's family regarding his arrest in the murder case. He was the one who prepared the arrest documents. Patil had made station diary entries for the arrest of the accused." More replied.

"Is it true that no specific work was done by you while preparing the panchnama?" Prashant asked Sanjay more.

"No, I did a lot of work; you can see me in the photographs while the panchnama was being done." Sanjay More explained to the court

"You are lying and giving false testimony to save the main culprit and the real main accused, Anuj Kumar Tikku. You are doing this because you want a posting with Unit Eight of the Crime Branch." Prashant Pandey lashed out at the witness one last time, trying to make a grand entrance and nail the witness.

"No, that is not true; it was the accused who pointed us to the skull and body parts in the Kumbharli Ghats. Vijay directed us to the spot, and I am not lying to save the main culprit, Anuj Kumar Tikku; that is a lie." Sanjay More thunder for the last time; the proceedings for the day were over, and Sanjay stood down from the stand.

By now, it was clear to all that. Indeed, it was Vijay and Dhananjay who nahi pointed to the spot where they had thrown the body of Karan and the skull of the unknown person. That was a big piece of evidence—the accused pointing to the body—and the court took cognizance of the fact.

Chapter Four: It's all in the DNA

DNA evidence can be complicated and very scientific for the layperson to understand and comprehend. Still, it is a significant ace up the sleeve of investigators who are investigating a crime, and that is murder. In this case, DNA has been crucial in first linking the body of Karan Kakkad and then finding out that there is another unknown man who was murdered along with him. This is where the theory came that the accused, Vijay Palande, was a serial killer who killed in pairs. First are Anup Das and his father, Swaraj Ranjan Das; Karan Kakkad and his unknown associate; Arun Tikku and his son, Anuj Tikku, who miraculously survived.

It was now time for another medical officer to take the stand to give a crucial DNA testimony. **Dr. Pratap Daya Anand**, aged sixty-five, is a retired medical officer residing in Shiva Ji Nagar in Thane.

"From 2005 to May 31st, 2012, I was attached to Nagpada Police Hospital as a medical officer. On April 19th, I was on day duty. On that day, Harish Kakkad and his mother, Rita Kakkad, were brought to the hospital by API Sawant. They wanted to get their DNA done and get their blood tests done. A letter stating the same was given to me. I collected the blood of Karan and Rita Kakkad in front of the ranch witnesses and filled them in containers; then I handed these to the police." Pratap Anand explained that he then pointed at articles 2 and 3 and acknowledged the letter given to him to assist in DNA sampling.

"What do you specialize in, doctor?" Vijay Palande got up to do the cross.

"I am an MD in chest medicine, not a specialist in microbiology or pathology. I have served the Maharashtra Health Services for over thirty years." Dr. Anand explained to the court that he was an experienced doctor.

"Did you maintain an inward and outward-bound register for samples?" Palande asked forcefully in an aggressive tone.

"Yes, we maintain a register where blood samples are collected and stored as per guidelines." Dr. Anand explained.

"How much blood did you extract?" Vijay Palande continued with his cross.

"I collected 5 ml of blood samples each from Rita and Harish Kakkad." Dr. Anand replied instantly as if he had the answer.

"Do you know the full meaning of DNA?" Vijay asked.

"No, I do not know that." Dr. Daya Anand replied.

"Have you brought any medical documents and records to court today?" Palande thundered.

"No, I have not." Dr. Anand replied.

"Did you get a receipt from the police after giving them the blood samples?" Palande further asked.

"Yes, I did take a receipt from the police." Dr. Anand told the court He was shown the receipts as exhibits 54 and 56, and Dr. Anand acknowledged that they were duplicate receipts.

"Is the Nagpada Hospital meant for policemen and their families?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"Yes, it is meant to serve the police and their families." Daya Anand replied.

"As per the norms and protocol, it is essential for the medical expert to analyze the genetic abnormalities of the patient." Prashant Pandey asked.

"No, that is not essential." Dr. Anand replied.

The DNA testimony was crucial, as were the blood samples collected from Karan Kakkad's Oberoi Springs flat bathroom and the blood of two people. The cops had collected the samples from the drain pipe and between the tiles by scraping the soil. One blood sample matched Kakkad's headless and legless body torso, and the other blood sample matched that of the DNA of the skull. This confirmed to the cops that Vijay Palande and his accomplice Dhananjay Shinde had cut up one more person in Karan's bathroom, and that was the unknown person whose identity they wanted to know.

So, while the torso was Karan's, the unknown skull was that of one of his associates. The police suspected it could be a fellow bookie of Karan's, as Karan was also into cricket betting. It was clear that two people had been killed in

Karan's flat: one was Karan himself, and the other was the unknown person whose skull was found. But the skull had no name or identity; it was an unidentified male between 25 and 40. But who was he? No one knew. Too sure of this fact and the mystery of the fifth victim, the cops had taken permission from the courts to do a NARCO test and brain mapping of Palande and Dhananjay Shinde. They were asked a total of seventy direct questions based on facts as they were strapped to a monitor, and their pulse and heart rate were being measured.

The cops conducted these tests in the Kalina lab for over two hours, grilling each accused, but they did not get any specific and definitive answers. The accused were able to scuttle the direct questions of the cops and gave away nothing about the identity of the fifth unknown and unidentified victim killed in Karan's flat along with him.

Even sketches were made, and computer graphics were used to give the skull a face and figure out if it matched someone's face or pictures that the cops had in their missing person lists and old files. Still, nothing fit, and the cops were not able to give a name to the person whose skull was found with eighteen bones from Kumbharli Ghats. Cops suspected Palande had purposely taken them around the bend and platted the skull to scuttle the police investigations.

But the DNA analysis proved once and for all that Vijay Palande had a style and a trademark, and that was that he killed in pairs.

"Baba re itna bura admi is a very evil man." Palande is a criminal mind; you are so lucky to be alive, Anuj; the gods are watching out for you; otherwise, you would be dead by now." Srikanth Tawde had once told me in my hotel room: I now realize how close I came to being the skull in that brown carton in the court reduced to a DNA report on a sheet of paper. But alas! I am alive and well, breathing and living

so well that I can narrate the sordid tale. This killing spree was a very close shave for me, indeed.

These were not men of this world but monsters out for blood with no remorse or guilt. I had only heard about the underworld in movies and heard stories of killer gangs in novels, not knowing that one day I would become a character in a real-life crime story and a year later would be the author of my true crime story. Life is mysterious and wondrous at the same time. Death and life are a shadow of each other, and for the first time, I saw the face of death up close. Now, I fear nothing. Having gone through such a harrowing experience has taken fear away from my heart. If I could live through this hell, I could live through anything. But at that time, I had no clue that I had gotten involved with such rotten people. How could I? It is not written on a serial killer's face that he is a serial killer. Vijay Palande looked to be as harmless as me.

It is a chilling tale, evident from the reactions of the people who followed the case in court. People cringed in court as witness after witness told the court how the skull, torso, and other body parts were recovered from Chiplun, how the murder weapon was obtained, and how shopping was done to help in cutting up the bodies. This story was straight out of a Martin Scorsese film, *The Goodfellas*. This was Mumbai's underworld and organized crime at its best; no wonder the cops also decided to slap MACOCA on Vijay Palande. The Crime branch unit nine had one tall cupboard dedicated to Vijay Palande, packed to the brim. This time, the system looks determined to get him out of life, and the state is trying hard to get him to the gallows. But till then, it seems Vijay Palande will fight till the bitter end. Having lived the good life on other people's money, he is unwilling to go to the gallows.

That much was clear: Vijay Palande was keen to prove that he did not run away from police custody after his arrest at Satara by the crime branch unit eight team.

He had filed an application in court saying that he wanted station tires and called record data of the police officers who arrested him and Dhananjay Shinde. Those officers were his relatives, Sanjay Shinde, Amol Deshpande, Phatange, Pote, and others. He wanted to prove that he was always in police custody and that the police had arrested me as an accused as well at Satara itself, and station diaries and police call records will prove that. The police have been reluctant to share data to help their case, and Vijay has faced roadblocks. No one wants him to have a fair trial, and the world is convinced that a man like this must rot in hell.

"Uska time is over; he is khatam ab koi poochta nahi usko. Many new gangsters are young and more deviant than Vijay Palande. He spends his time doing meditation and yoga. Dhananjay has also become a yoga teacher in jail and shaved his head. "Wo sab jail mein khatam hai. He does try and show his might from time to time in jail, but we beat him up as well." Kadam had informed me once. I was curious to know how my old pal Vijay was passing the time in prison as under trial. "Anda cell jail life is horrible. There are too many misquotes, and the living conditions could be better. Many died during Corona of sickness, but for these mother fuckers, this is only their life. Look how he tries to behave as if he is innocent in court, blaming the police process for everything. Usko hum jakad ke rakhe ge." Kadam had told me during my visits to the court.

Doctor Pratap Daya Anand had had enough. It seemed the defense team was trying to grill him on blood and DNA collection processes and wanted to know if he followed the guidelines of a Maharashtra Medical Health Book. They even blamed him for lying due to police pressure and said that he had not taken proper receipts while giving blood in containers to the police. At the end of his testimony, the man looked harassed and frustrated. I mean, it looked like he was the accused and the murderer. The entire defense team ganged up on the poor chap. By the end of the evening, luckily, the poor man's agony was over, and he duly got off the witness box with a sigh of relief. All the while, the old, dusty white ceiling fans in the courts rotated at half speed, causing an unwanted squeaky sound

reverberating throughout the room. Occasionally, a flush of cold wind would enter the courtroom through the large wooden windows, which looked ancient, as if out of the British Raj.

"Do you know why a court is called a sessions court?" "I had once asked Kadam, "Yes, a sessions court is where serious offense trials take place, like murder and rape. The court has the power to hang and give the maximum punishment." Kadam filled me in. Today, the walls of the courtroom are crying out to figure out who the unknown victim of Palande was, and as of now, no one has a clue. There are DNA reports, blood analysis, brain mapping, and lie detector tests, but no one can give a name to the skull, and no one knows who his family members are; it has just been lying dormant and extinct like a fossil in a brown cardboard box marked with an exhibit number. The abandoned skull with no name and no gender begs to be identified.

As of now, there is no one to claim it or call it their own. The fifth victim of Vijay Palande, it seems, will remain a deep secret in his heart. Only Vijay Palande knows who his fifth victim was, but he has hidden it in the recesses of his mind for eleven years as if daring the court to figure this one out. All the evidence, the scientific analysis, the call data, the DNA, the fingerprinting—the cops are still clueless who that skull belongs to; they have no name to give the skull; it just lies as an exhibit as if unwanted and uncared for, ruthlessly killed, I am sure, by Vijay Palande and his gang. The skull stares at the court, lifeless and listless, like some ancient relic or fossil whose identity is unknown. Judges, doctors, and forensic experts try to figure out who the person is. There is a lot of confusion about its gender. Most say it is a male skull, but some experts believe it is too small and could be that of a child. Computer graphic techniques have given the skull a face and look, but it has proved futile. No one knows who Vijay's fifth victim was except for the serial killer himself, and he is not opening his mouth. He already has five murder cases to deal with; another one will only increase his woes and his time spent in the justice system running from one courtroom to another. But alas! That is what Vijay's current life is: from jail to court and back to his lonely

cell. His routine for several years has just been from one hearing to another. No doubt he dreams of freedom someday, but no one in the justice system is willing to grant him that.

"That bastard Dhananjay had applied for bail again through his lawyer, but the court has rejected his application. This happened weeks after your testimony, confirming that you impacted the court. It seems they are not letting these guys go free until the actual verdict in all the cases is out." Kadam had informed me over the phone when I left Mumbai.

"See, Karan was into cricket betting, and he owed Palande some money as one of the people for him to be bumped off. Vijay had heard from Simran that Karan had made a killing in the IPL sessions. Vijay wanted his money back, and when Karan refused, he kicked him off with another guy. "That unknown skull could be of a cricket bookie." Some chatter of this sort was also heard in and around the court as people gossiped about the unknown victim and tried to speculate on the identity of the skull that was presented in court.

"Sanjay Nirupam, the politician that Vijay had said he would introduce Karan too, there is a political angle to this; it seems Palande was also doing hawala transactions for Sanjay Nirupam; he would arrange holi parties for Nirupam, and Simran would go shopping to Bangkok with Nirupam's wife; they were doing some clothing business; they even had a shop in Lokhandwala market selling exported garments." The speculations were further fueled by people whispering and gossiping in the courthouse corridors.

To my surprise, there was not much press coverage outside the court regarding the goings on in the Palande murder cases. There would be occasional write-ups in the media about the case's slow progress. Of course, there was an article about

Manoj Gjakosh's bail plea being executed by the high court as he was given interim bail, but he had to be present in the accused box during the court proceedings. The cops must have grilled Manoj to figure out who the skull belonged to, but Manoj played a minimal role in Palande's other crimes, so I guess that was also a reason for granting him bail. The police could not get anything out of Manoj's confession. The case of the skull and the case 775 was like heading for a dead end. It was being conducted as a formality, and no one connected with the case felt that Vijay and his gang would be convicted for an unknown person's murder. It was a curious case where the victims were unidentified, there was no motive, and there was no murder weapon. Getting a conviction for this case would be highly unlikely, and it seems that Palande would go scot-free and not get convicted.

"What is the difference between high society and low society? Both have serial killers." Vijay was the rich man's serial killer. He hunted people who were affluent and well-off. Look at his circle and his friends, Gautam Vora and Sanjay Nirupam. No doubt he became overconfident. With his connections, no one would be able to touch him. He just got it all wrong with your dad's murder." Srikant Tawde once murmured to me over a fish curry thali during lunchtime in Fort.

"Potla bana de ga tera, that's how Vijay threatened people and did his extortions from people even in jail. He was threatening builders from inside jail to try to negotiate land and real estate deals that had gotten stuck. He should have stuck to doing mandwali between rival gangs; now that he has been in jail for so long, no one fears him anymore. In the underworld business, the fear factor is significant. It is around the fear that the underworld works, and today, no one fears Vijay Palande; his time is up." Srikant Tawde continued his monologue, and I gave him a patient ear.

" Yes! This city extracts a price from everyone; it has also extracted one from him. No one remains untouched by this tragedy, neither the victims nor the accused. The vermin inside the vortex was scarred by it, some a little, some a bit more." I told Tawde, trying to take the conversation forward, that we were both in a philosophical mood that day.

"I believe there is a lot of rampant homosexual activity in prison amongst the inmates, as it is difficult to get wives and girlfriends inside the jail," I asked Srikant Tawde, who seemed all too eager to answer my questions.

" Yes! Yes, full ass fucking business, what you say butt screwing inmates are stacked one over the other, there is hardly any place in jail, either people become celibate or homo in jail." Srikant said it plainly and without the slightest bit of embarrassment.

It's been eleven years, yet no one can assert an identity for the abandoned skull.

Vijay was playing with the minds of the cops, and they were fucking his brains in return. That is the relationship between the cops and the underworld criminals; in a way, they are opposed, yet they are also symbolic, one needing the other. There can be no cops if there are no criminals, and vice versa. They are somehow interdependent, and that interdependence comes out in the story of Vijay and all his crimes.

After all, Vijay took the cops to the wrong skull and animal bones, confusing their trail further. Palande told Dhananjay to keep Karan's mobile in the public toilet of a train headed for Delhi. He had done this to confuse the investigations, but the cops at Unit Nine Crime Branch thought otherwise. They interrogated Dhananjay and Vijay separately and took them to Chiplun in separate vehicles. They knew Dhananjay would lead them to the torso of Karan, which he finally did.

To me, the process of the courts looked wasteful; it was as if everyone was doing their job, no one was interested in the victims, time had passed, and memories of Arun Tikku and Karan Kakkad had faded. But I was still seeking answers and wanted justice for my slain father; that was the least that I could do for my old man. The only issue was that the closure I sought was not forthcoming.

"Our job is to clean up the kachra of the city every day so that it's clean for the next day. No matter what we do as policemen, there will always be crime in this city. Our job is to clean it up for the day." Gitesh Kadam told me over drinks.

Indeed, as ordinary folks who go about their regular lives in the city, no one appreciates the job the brave police officers in the town are doing by guarding us and keeping us safe. They are not a highly equipped or manned force, but they still manage to stop crime efficiently. They may not have been able to save my dad, but they surely caught his killers and made sure they stayed behind bars for over a decade. For that, I have nothing but praise for the Unit Nine Crime Branch Team.

"We will never know how many people this Raksha has killed; I guess no one will get anything from his brain mapping tests. The names of all of Palande's victims will never be known, but I can bet there are a few more black polite bags somewhere in the Kumbharli Ghats that reek of the dead; no one will ever know." Kadam had told me with a sigh and some mounting pain in his heart that he had been attached to this case for over three years, and no doubt he had also gotten involved with its tragic story and the drama that took place during the murder spree that rocked Mumbai in 2012. Kadam was like A selfless warrior who was very much involved in all the case processes and knew them well. He was undoubtedly a source of rich information for me, and I could keep tabs on the

case through my conversations with Kadam. We had developed a mutual respect, and I knew I needed a trusted cop on my side.

To me, case 775 was a dead end and frivolous; no one knew that was what was being dragged out just for the sake of the court process; even the forensics needed clarification about its identity and lineage. But yes, it was another way of keeping Vijay Palande behind bars for a long time. The more cases slapped on him, the more he will remain entangled in the legal process and the less chance he has of getting out of all this and getting his freedom or bail. As of now, he was a prisoner and under trial, wearing the badge of a parole jumper in jail, and everyone knew the world wanted him inside prison for a long time. The only person on Vijay's side was himself; his corner was empty as he defended himself in court. This was another example of overconfidence and bravado from Vijay's side. It isn't easy to win cases without the help of an excellent professional lawyer well versed in the legal processes of the court. Without a lawyer, he had handicapped himself because most of his pleas were handwritten, not on legal documents. It was shabby, and I am sure that as the trial progresses, Vijay will find it challenging to juggle so many murder cases one after the other.

But this has become his new life for him, from the jail to the court and then back. "At least till the case is on, he gets the chance to come out of jail and get fresh air occasionally. When the cases are over, he will be locked up in a room forever." Srikanth had told me during one of my court visits.

Chapter Five: More Skeletons

Dr. Yatin Vilas Mayekar, aged forty-three, was a medical officer at the Chiplun PHC center. It was now his turn to give his testimony.

"On the 16th of April 2012, I was attached to the Chiplun PHC in Shirgaon, and the police asked me to come and help some skulls. Human bones had been discovered in the Kumbharli Ghats, and they asked me to come with a jar, polythene bags, a box, and formalin liquid. They wanted me to pack the bones and skulls, but before packing, the cops took photographs of the human remains. The photographs in articles G and F are the photographs of the human remains that the police took in front of me." Mayekar stated this in open court.

"I gave my opinion to the police that the skull is a human skull, for sure." Yatin proclaimed that he was then shown the form he had signed as a witness, and Yatin acknowledged it.

"What are your qualifications, doctor?" Vijay Palande got up to do the cross.

"I am MBBS. I passed out in 2002 from Navi Mumbai, and I have done many postmortems. An inquest panchnama is indeed done before any postmortem." Yatin replied confidently.

"Do you have any specialization in forensic pathology or odontology?" Palande asked.

"No, I have no specialization in that, and I have also not authored any books on forensic science," Yatin replied.

"Did you do any tests to ascertain that the skull and bones were of the same person?" Vijay asked.

"No, I have not done any tests, nor have I done any carbon dating." I cannot say if the skull and the bones are of the same person." Yatin replied.

"How many bones are there in the human body, doctor?" Vijay pressed further.

"There are 216 bones in the human body," Yatin replied confidently.

"How many vertebrae are there in a human body?" Vijay Palande asked:

"There are 23 vertebrae in a human body." Yatin confidently replied.

"Are you aware of the Maharashtra Civil Medical Code 1976, which talks about the procedure for preserving bones, skulls, and human skeleton remains? Vijay Palande probed further.

" Yes! I know of such a manual, and we followed all the correct procedures." Replied Yatin "Are the bones and skull of a child?" Vijay asked.

"No, I cannot say that, but it is a human skull," Yatin replied.

"Are the bones and skull of the same person?" Palande asked.

"No, they are not the same person." Replied Yatin

"Did you carry out carbon dating on the bones to figure out if the person died of a natural death or if the death was homicidal?" Vijay asked.

"No, I did not do carbon dating." I cannot tell if the person's death was natural or homicidal; there are no injury marks on the bone; that much is clear to me." Yatin said the judge was in open court.

"You are lying; there is overwriting in the outgoing and going register, and the police have instructed you to give a false statement and testify wrongly in court." Prashant Pandey got up and threw a salvo at Yatin.

"No, that is incorrect; no one has instructed me to give false testimony," Yatin replied and slowly got down from the witness box.

Then came the turn of retired **ACP Arun Shankar Satpute**, aged 64 years; he now stood up to take the stand.

"In 2012, I was attached to the crime branch Unite Nine. Senior PI Satardekar was the investigation officer, and PI Sharad Patil investigated crime number 105/12. During the investigation, the accused made no statement that he was willing to show us where he had thrown the body of the deceased Karan Kumar Kakkad. In this crime, we recovered one skull and eighteen bones that were sent for panchanama, and then we took their photographs as well. Forensic experts were called, and the skull and bones were packed and sent to the anatomy department of J.J. Hospital. I had arrested accused one and two, and the skull recovered, which is now shown to me in court, did not match Karan Kakkad." Arun Shankar clearly stated this in an open courtroom.

"The FSL report showed that the DNA of the skull did not match with Rita and Karan, which is when I registered another murder case on June 9, 2012. I have also filed the charge sheet for the third unknown murder in court against the accused." Arun spoke his truth and then got down from the witness box. The man had duly done his duty. Now old and a little slow, he kept his cool in court.

Uday Sadanand came forward at the age of fifty-two; he was the ASI attached to Dharavi at the time the murders took place.

"I was attached to crime branch unit nine on April 19, 2012, and on April 19, PI Satardekar told me to take Harish and Rita Kakkad to Nagpada Police Station for a blood and DNA test. I was given. Letter as well regarding this. That is the letter." Uday pointed his finger at Exhibit 92 in court to identify the authority letter he had been given.

"The doctor took their blood samples and filled out all the document formalities," Uday explained to the court.

"Where are the signatures of the panch witnesses taken on the forms?" Asked Prashant Pandey, the lawyer on the defense team.

"Yes, they were taken." Uday pointed at the document shown to him as exhibit 144 by the court clerk.

"When did you take the blood samples to Kalina FSL Lab?" Prashant Pandey asked the witness.

"I took the blood samples the same day with Deepak Sawant; we both took them too, Kalina," Uday answered.

"Did you maintain station diary entries for the same?" Vijay Palande got up to do the cross.

"Yes, I did, but I am not carrying the diaries or registers with me today in court," Uday answered.

"How did you get to Nagpada Hospital?" Vijay Palande asked.

"In a police vehicle." Answered Uday.

"Do you remember the make or number of the vehicle?" Palande asked.

"No, I do not remember that at all." Replied Uday.

"What was the doctor's name who collected the blood samples?" Vijay asked.

"The name of the doctor was Pratap Anand." Replied Uday.

"Instead of taking Rita and Karan Kakkad, you took two dummies to the Nagpada Hospital; they were not the real relatives of the Kakkad family; you attached their photographs falsely on the form; and you were asked to do this by your superiors; accordingly, you have also manipulated hospital diary entries." Vijay Palande thundered in court.

He had no choice but to prove to the court that the Mumbai police were framing him and that the senior people in the police were manipulating facts to prepare him. This was the single-point strategy of Vijay Palande throughout the trial, and every question in his cross was framed in such a way as to validate his theory that the Mumbai police in these murders were binding him.

"No, that is not correct; that is false." I did not take any dummies or manipulate any form or diary entry." Uday answered confidently.

"Who attested the photographs on the form? Who put the photos of Rita and Harish Kakkad on the form then?" Vijay asked.

"The doctor was Pratap Anand, and he did it in my presence," Uday replied.

"What were the names of the paanch witnesses who signed the forms about DNA and blood sampling? Vijay Palande asked.

"The witnesses were Nikam and Chipkar." Uday replied.

"Do you know their age and occupation?" Vijay asked

"No, I do not remember that," Uday replied politely.

"Where were the statements of the witnesses recorded at that time?" Palande asked.

"No, they were not recorded," Uday replied.

"Do you know where the ranch witnesses were called from?" Vijay asked.

"No, I do not know." Replied Uday

"Do you know about the DNA process, and did you make any entries regarding DNA analysis?" Vijay asked the witness

"No, I do not know about DNA," Uday replied

"You planted dummy people at Nagpada Police Station; come on, tell the truth; you are lying under oath." Vijay thundered.

"No, that is not true; they're where no dummies are," Uday replied, and he quietly stepped off the witness stand as the time for the court session was over.

After the court sessions, Vijay Palande and the other accused used to be taken back to their van by police escorts, sometimes two, sometimes three, and they would be taken back to their barracks and cells in the jail. That had been the process for Vijay and his gang, and for eleven years, they had been caught up in this vicious cycle of jail to court and back to jail. They deserved it and should be happy that, due to our slow and lax judicial system, they have survived, lived, and even thrived for so long.

As for me, I still wait for justice and their final sentencing, but that remains a distant dream. It is only possible that one day, the session court will pronounce its judgment.

It could come soon, or it could take a very long time to come. But that is true: no one is letting Vijay Palande escape this time; he remains behind bars with no breathing space.

The man will have much free time to think about his fate and what could happen to him and his life. If he escapes hanging, he will surely get life, which means another decade behind bars. If he manages to come out somehow, he will have to fight the very gangsters whom he squealed to the cops; they will be looking for his blood. "For most gangsters who have been in jail for a long time, it is better to be in jail than be wandering outside; if they go out of jail, the rival gangs will shoot them. Many gangsters do not leave jail because they fear being bumped off." Kadam had told me during our early meetings.

"Par jail mein apna pura routine follow karta hei Vijay; you know yoga, and most of the time he is busy reading his case files or filling out RTI," Kadam explained to me, giving me a bit of an insight into Vijay Palande's life in a high-security Anda cell. "Only his sister now comes to visit him in jail; she brings clothes for him. Wo bhi kab tak, one day his money will finish, and even his relatives will stop visiting him in jail; he will be left alone. You know Dhananjay's father died; we did not permit him to go to his father's funeral and last rites. There is no way he killed someone's father; why should he be allowed to burn his father? He has even shaved his head now. If you inflict suffering on someone, it is bound to come back to you and your life. It is a case-and-effect reaction; the misery you suffered is coming to them too by fate in jail." Kadam told me like a wise sage.

"What a criminal mind! He mixed the skulls with animal bones; no one would know which was which. Thank god he was finally caught; otherwise, god knows how many more people would have died. Your dad's murder saved a lot more innocent victims. In a way, your dad gave his life, but in retribution, he saved the lives of so many others. A brave man he was. He fought hard, very hard. I can tell you so. I have seen the post-mortem photographs." Kadam told me she was trying to console me at times. "We will keep him engaged in all the murder cases, and the court is in no mood to give him bail. Our friend Palande is not going to get away with all three murders; he will be convicted in one of the two cases. In your father's case, he will be convicted, and the courts will throw the book at him this time. This is not his first murder." Kadam went on to tell me

"Dekhata nahi hei! Par jail mein rota hoga." Kadam said to me

"Jail ki roti tod kar mota ho gaya hei, now I know how the victims' families felt when the government's net was feeding mutton Biryani and Nihari to Kasab when his case was going on. These bastards are getting fat on government money

as innocent victims like us suffer." I told Kadam I was getting irritated with my current state instead.

"He keeps referring to Pooja Changowalia's book and asking everyone if they gave an interview to the crime reporter. I mean, what a Chutiya! He gave her an interview, so why should other people not give her an interview? She has painted him as a serial killer. He should be happy she is getting a trip; he should be dead on the street." I told Kadam my fury and emotions were coming. Even eleven years later, this case was hunting me and adding to my suffering as well.

"Some Tamasha he has to create in court; the book is just an excuse anyway; he can't get the publisher to stop publishing the book; the court has not passed any order on it," Kadam told me to add to our conversation.

"We are not going to give him our personal call records and diary entries; we will only share evidence with the court that helps our case; that's all. We are here to win the case; that is the only way to bring back the morale of the Mumbai Police. This is a high-profile case, and everyone wants to benefit from it, especially the police. It will be great for the department if we get a positive conviction." Kadam said with a big smile on his face, "Why not? He had been working hard on the witnesses and getting them to court, and she deserved a promotion more than anyone else.

"You guys are counting your chickens before they hatch. Vijay will also challenge any verdict to the High Court and Supreme Court. It can take more than two years, the time you all estimate. Remember, my friend, there are lots of slips between cup and lip." I told Kadam over our many conversations on the phone or otherwise.

Kadam was like my go-to guy on my father's murder case in Mumbai, and he did help me out a lot. His moral support was much needed by me, especially when I took the stand in my father's murder case. But in this case, 775, the case of the unknown skull, there were no eyes, no witnesses, and no family of the victim, as no one knew who the skull belonged to. The victim had no name and no identity, and we only knew that it was a human skull. That's all—a nameless, faceless victim of Vijay Palande's murderous gang. The skull was begging to be owned, but no one had come forward to possess it; it just remained in the carton box as a relic as dust from the court gathered on it. There were sheer debates with doctors, lawyers, and forensic experts, but not much came out of their testimonies; no one knew who the hell Vijay Palande's fifth victim was, and the court conversions had amounted to nothing.

The DNA had proved futile; it did not match with Karan's. That much was clear, but then, who was the skull? Who was the person who was hacked with Karan Kakkad in his bathroom? No one knew. There was only a hot debate on it in court but no conclusion.

Yet the judicial process continued daily as defense lawyers filed appeal after appeal for them. The longer the trial went on, the better, with more income and fees for them, and even if they posted the case, they would still get some publicity from the high-profile case when the final verdict of the sessions court came out.

The victims were long dead and buried, but the scent of the victims and their lives lived on amongst the musty smell of court papers, paper clippings, paperweights, and dozens of court exhibits. You could feel the victims somewhere through these innate and dead objects; they lived on as reports, forms, and station diary entries.

Their ashes were buried inside plastic bags full of case files as if it were an urn carrying their ashes and charred bones.

Witness after witness took their stand and gave their testimony as, bit by bit, inch by inch, the case moved on, with no one entirely in control of the legal process and no one knowing how long it would take for a verdict to arrive.

"The press will be keen to report on the verdict, and I am sure there will be pressure on the courts to deliver a positive verdict, which sends a strong message that things like these will not be tolerated in society at all, but till that happens, Palande will fight. He is a foul man, but there is a Maratha warrior in him somewhere, and he has managed to fight on for a long time." Kadam told me

"Is it important how you prep the witnesses? My work also involves that, and I don't think I will get any certificate or medal of honor." Kadam said he felt disappointed that his services would not get just rewards. "The senior officers and the commissionaires hog all the limelight from the media, and we junior officers rarely get any credit for solving crime cases. But yes, the investigation officer might be rewarded with a quick promotion if Vijay is finally convicted and given a very tough sentence. We are all hoping for that in the department." Kadam explained the internal politics among the cops and their various departments.

As for me, I was just happy to be alive and breathing. I was alive amongst all the blood, gore, murder, mayhem, chopped bodies, skulls, and human skeletons. I somehow managed to survive, and not only stay, I had managed to pen down the entire tale. More than anything, that was a miracle, a gift from the gods to me. Anuj Tikku had survived such an enormous calamity and finally moved on.

I cannot remember how many folks and people I have narrated this yarn of murder and deceit to—many, many times too many people, even to rank strangers. Every time I tell the tale, it gets longer and longer with more twists and turns than before. I add my masala and magic to the yarn to get people's attention. Still, no matter who I tell it to, people always get a fright and cringe at the dastardly acts of the main villain and antagonist of the story, one of its chief architects, the serial killer Vijay Palande.

Chapter Six: Shopping for Chopping

It was a great detail that Vijay and Dhananjay did their shopping at Food Bazar for their respective murders, and the cops made sure that the manager of the Food Bazar gave his testimony in court. That serving store manager in April 2012 at the Food Bazaar was a gentleman named **Prathamesh Umesh Bhai Shroff**, aged 45, currently residing in Kandivali. It was his turn to take the witness box.

"In April 2012, I was a store manager at Food Bazar in Infinity Mall. We have a credit card machine. A person with a credit card swipes the machine, and the bill is generated. We get two slips from the machine: one we give to the customer and the other we keep for our records. But the four-digit secret pin must be known to us; otherwise, the machine will not swipe the card. If the person knows the pin, he can purchase the machine." Explained the service manager, Prathamesh Umesh Bhai Shroff.

"On the 5th of March, Crime Branch Bandra came to Infinity Mall and inquired if Karan Sood had made any purchases through our store. They were asking for purchase slips. We made internal inquiries on the 7th of March 2012, and I went to the crime branch with the purchase slips made by Karan Sood on his credit card. The cardholder had purchased floor cleaner, toilet cleaner, hand gloves, garbage bags, a mop, menial water bottles, and utensils. I gave the slips to the police, who took them before the panch witnesses. When Karan Sood made the purchase, Vaishali Kamble was the cashier." Umesh explained to the open court.

"What else did the police ask for?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"The police also asked me to give samples of black garbage bags sold at our store. I gave them some samples of the same." Replied Umesh.

"What about the bar code? How does that work?" Prashant Pandey from the defense team asked,"

"Every product in the store has a bar code, which is an identification mark for any product, and there was a bar code on the garbage bags that the said card holder, Karan Sood, had bought from our store." Umesh gave his answer crisply.

"In 2012, how many cards did you swipe in a day? I mean, how many customers visited your store?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"Around a thousand customers a day—that was an average in those days for our store," Umesh replied.

"Who handles accounts and the audit department of the food bazaar?" Prashant Pandey from the defense team asked; he wanted to understand the internal processes of the store.

"We have a finance department that liaisons with the banks to get payment and card full filament done," Umesh replied.

"So why do you keep an extra purchase slip, then?" Prashant Pandey probed further.

"We keep the extra slip to manage any dispute with the bank on transactions, and the commercial department of Food Bazar makes sure that the banks reimburse the money," Umesh explained the financial process internally at Food Bazar, and he was doing an excellent job at that. The lawyers were listening to him when suddenly Prashant Pandey thundered.

"You are lying; the cops have pressurized you to testify in court falsely." Prashant Pandey said to the witness:

"No, that is not true; that is false," Umesh replied instantly.

"How are biometrics done in the food bazaar?" Prashant Pandey asked.

"We record all figure prints and attendance through biometrics; I have not handed a biometric attendance sheet to the police," Umesh explained.

"What about CCTV footage?" Prashant Pandey thundered

"That is the job of the security in charge or the loss prevention cell; they are the ones who look at CCTV footage. If you take any product from the store, the security will check your bag and stamp your bill. That is the process. I have not signed any bill or letter before taking the garbage bag samples out of the store to give to the police." Umesh said meekly.

"What style of English do you use to write the date on your bills? American or English style? Prashant asked.

"I do not know the style; I am sorry," Umesh replied. After that, he stepped down from the witness stand as the court was adjourned for a recess.

One by one, witnesses came and spoke their truth. One after another, the defense lawyers got up. They questioned them, trying to pick holes in their testimony, trying to intimidate them with awkward questions, digging over mundane and irrelevant facts and information, at times threatening and persistent. The defiance lawyers had a job to do, and that's what they were doing: trying to protect the interests of their clients and digging through process manuals, old bills, and medical records, looking for any whiff of mistake or discrepancy in the prosecution case. Court cases are all about arguments, rebuttals, objections, and pleas, and this drama has gone on and on, but as of now, the judgment is still far away as all the cases have only moved to the halfway mark.

Paperwork, files, reports, and more paper: The only thing increasing with time in this case is the number of pages and files, but justice is still far away. Yes! But the field they had grown thicker, fatter, and heavier by the day. At the beginning of the case, Kadam would carry one large bag of files to court. Today, he was

carrying three large grey bags off-field, and I am sure the number would keep increasing as the cases continued.

As for Vijay Palande, he is getting fatter and fatter eating jail food. Already a convicted murderer, the law has undoubtedly been very lenient with him, and he has been lucky to escape the law for such a long time. How the courts will treat him this time remains to be seen. But alas! The system has to be followed, and that process takes time. That is the way to justice. It may be frustrating for the victims and their families, but that is the way it is, and that is the way it shall remain. The road to justice is riddled with pain, and one has to have faith and be patient.

Then you have the summer months when the courts are off for the holiday season again, with an endless wait for the courts to reopen and the process to begin again.

"The cost had taken the samples of the black garbage bags because they wanted to compare them with black garbage bags in which the skull and the bones were thrown, and the bags were identical, which confirmed that Vijay and Dhananjay had done shopping for the murder from Big Bazar itself. Harish and Rita Kakkad had also taken the mall's CCTV footage, which showed Vijay and Dhananjay walking out of the store with the shopping bags." Kadam explained to me, and now it was clear why Umesh's testimony was needed. It was needed to establish that the goods required to carry out the murder and dispose of the body were bought from Infinity Mall and Food Bazar.

The entire shopping for chopping was done at the store, and well in advance, the Xylo of Sanjay Shinde was meant to be the get-away vehicle in which Arun Tikku's chopped body was supposed to be carried away to Chiplun. After disposing of

Arun Tikku's body, the gang would have indeed killed me in the Chiplun farmhouse, and if not, they would have slit my throat before reaching the farmhouse. I was high and intoxicated, as it is throughout the journey, and I slept most of the way to Chiplun. Oh! How close I came to my death. I was inebriated, and in the jaws of death itself, the only thing that saved me was that I, Anuj Tikku, survived to tell the entire tale. It was a sheer miracle that I should not have been dead. Each item for hacking and disposing of the body was meticulously planned and kept in the right spot. It was a simple process for Vijay Palande; it was his job; it was his lively hood; this was his criminal way to make money and live the lavish life that he and Simran Sood were accustomed to; only this time, things went wrong him and his men as they were caught in the act of murdering Arun Tikku; they were spotted doing it. Along with that, all the instruments for hacking, like hacksaws, cutters, wires, bags, garbage bags, floor cleaners, shampoo bottles, and phenyl bottles, were left behind in the flat when the duo fled and escaped from the bathroom duct of the first floor flat. Things just went spiraling down for Vijay after that; now, there was no way that he could finish me off as my dad's murder did not go according to plan.

Oh! How fate turned the tables on him! A man who was merely evading the law and enjoying the fruits of his criminal endeavors was caught with his pants down, naked for the world to see.

"I have got this chewawa dog for Simran; it has a separate passport and a dog kennel; we take it along whenever Simran travels by flight; she loves her doggy." Karan Sood, aka Vijay Palande, used to tell me, "Well, he won't get pet dogs to play with now that he is going to be in jail for a very long time. Eleven years of fighting the case must have emptied his wallet, and as for Simran, she has left Mumbai for good and is currently living far away from the world in anonymity. So many lives were wasted, destroyed, and changed after this one incident. Every character in this humongous tragedy suffers. If human suffering is the ultimate truth, then the Tikku murders bear testimony to that fact.

People who looked so harmless and civil suddenly changed for the worse; this was like the Rocky Horror Show, as one murder opened the mystery of another and then another. The evil, the darkness, and the blood were so much that it looked straight out of the plot of a dark comedy. The tragedy was so grave that it brought tears to everyone's eyes. Vijay Palande, aka Karan Sood, felt that he could pull these murders off and was confident that he would get away even after Arun Tikku's murder was detected. He thought the system had enough pals to bail him out somehow. That is where his calculation failed, and his karma caught up with him. He could not cut a deal with Deven Bharti and the cops of the top brass. He was not able to escape with such a naked and blatant crime committed in such a direct and ruthless manner. He was confident till the end, but this time, he was caught; this time, he was nailed.

"You can push your luck occasionally, but everything gives way one day. He made one big mistake; he kept his hand on you, Anuj." Kadam told me over dinner and drinks. "Yes! I am a meditator, and it is not easy to finish off a meditator. We have powers that mortal men cannot understand or comprehend. Vijay Palande thought he had understood me like the back of his hand, but he could never know me. No one has ever really known me, and that is the mystery of Anuj Baba." I told him with a smile on my face that things were going so well that I came mighty close to my death.

I remember that when I took my father Arun to Karan Sood, aka Vijay Palande's flat, for dinner at Oberoi Springs, she touched my father's feet not once but twice. The bitch, her lover, and her so-called brother didn't bat an eyelid when he ordered his men to stab and mercilessly kill my dad. As for me, I took my revenge before giving my testimony in court. I met Ujjwal Nigam and touched his feet to take his blessings so I could go forth and give my testimony and get Vijay Palande hanged. Tit for tat, this was tit for tat alright. They have a saying that if the criminal justice system does not get you, your karma will, and that is what is happening with Vijay Palande and his entire gang of merry bandits.

"The thing about the dead is that they can't speak; they are dead. We have to look at their bodies during the postmortem and figure out how the dead were killed and how they died. That is the job of the doctor who does the postmortems. It is through that that we figure out the time of death, the cause of death, and their struggle before they finally breathed their last." Doctor Vaishali told the court while Ash testified that her words still ring in my ears. As time and gain have passed, my father's last struggle as the large knife was thrust into his flesh, rupturing his organs, the cold steel must have been so painful that it must have reduced him to tears, and on top of that, he was strangled by a wire cord, a painful death no doubt. I still have nightmares thinking about it, and thank God I never saw any of the photographs of his dead body. I can only remember seeing him on a wooden plank covered in white bedsheets. Some blood had solidified around his lips. I could only see his face; it was cold. I touched his forehead; it was hard. His eyes were shut; he was stone-cold dead. In the deep recesses of my heart, I want Vijay Palande to get the same fate as my dad, just like my dad was brought to me dead. I want to see Vijay's stone-cold body wrapped up in a bedsheet. I want to touch his cold skin and see his hard grey face to confirm that he is finally dead. I want to see him hanged, and my deep desire is to be there to witness his hanging. Only his dead body will give me some solace and reassure me.

"If the courts give him the death penalty, I want to witness his hanging. I want to see him die with my own eyes. Is that possible? Will the law allow me that?" I had asked Kadam. "I don't think so. That will be allowed." Kadam had said, "Everything is possible. I will ask Ujjwal Nigam to allow me to see his hanging if he does indeed get the death penalty." I had informed Kadam on my last visit to Mumbai.

That was not asking for much since only blood can revenge blood. In my books, only when I see Palande Deda as a stone-cold slab would justice have been served in this case, and I wanted to see him hanged. His attitude in court has strengthened my resolve that if a man like that must go to the gallows, we are only safe in our homes; otherwise, we are not.

But the courts of Mumbai were not going to end that quickly. I would, at times, get lost in the sea of black coats and khaki uniforms, officers taking prisoners and criminals handcuffed to and fro through the court corridors. Some criminals even wore black masks; those must have been the murderers and rapists. The energy of the courts is quite harmful and stale. The courts remind me of an era gone by, especially in India; the buildings and their people froze in time. Everything reeks of an era gone by as people squabble over matters and incidents that happened ages ago, frozen in time by the flies and lengthy paperwork of the courts. At times, I even began to question what justice was and if there was anything called justice anyway. I would smoke a cigarette outside next to my police van and hear the tap of leather shoes as more prisoners arrived in court for their hearings.

The noise of honking buses and taxis around the fort area and the chatter of young boys and girls returning to school with the croaking pigeons flying in the air and the media vans and cameras, there was always news to be covered from the courts and one could always find a few journalists loitering around for a media story. Amongst all this, I had to wait my turn, patiently wait, and wait for justice.

But now we should move back into the courts as another witness was about to give his testimony for case 775, which was **Ayub Mohd. Mulla**, forty years of age. He was serving at a garment shop at that time. He took the stand in court.

On May 7, 2012, I was asked by a person, Mr. Taide, to become a pinch witness in a case where a murder crime had been committed, and I was asked to go to the crime branch in Bandra. There, I was met by PI Satardekar, who asked me to become a witness in the case. I agreed and then met Prathamesh Shroff, who

handed me one slip and two bills. On the slips as written, Axis Bank Food Bazar, Lokhandwala Andheri. It was a master card merchant copy with Karan Surendra Sood written on it. The transaction time was 5.58 p.m., and the slip was Rs 970/-. The date was mentioned as March 5, 2012. I can identify the slip and bill if shown to me." Ayub told the court.

The court clerk then showed him articles J and K, and he pointed to and acknowledged them.

"Did you sign the panchnama yourself?" Atul Pandey, the defense lawyer, asked

"Yes, I did, and I read it before signing it," Ayub replied.

"What are your educational qualifications?" Atul Pandey asked the witness:

"I have studied till the tenth standard," Ayub replied.

"You are giving false testimony at the behest of the police." Atul Pandey said forcefully:

"No, that is not true," Ayub replied and slowly stepped off the witness box as his testimony ended.

The endless finger-pointing in the courts continues, with the defense blaming the prosecution for delays, the defense accusing the witnesses of lying, the police pointing fingers at the accused, and the accused pointing fingers at the witnesses. The endless chatter and blabber went on, along with the clatter and noise of court clerks typing away on their systems as the judge dictated what the witnesses had said. The process of the courts went on session after session, yet no one knew who the skull belonged to, who the unknown victim was, or how many more Vijay Palande and his gang had murdered and killed.

For Vijay, it was a process as well, first identifying his victims, then getting close to them, winning their trust, and finally throwing them before killing them and disposing of their bodies in the Ghats. It was a day at the office for him, as it is now a day at the court's office for him. Vijay is caught in the web of his crimes, which he created and finally swallowed him and his entire gang. Nothing good can come out of something so wrong and evil, and the story as it unfolds bears

witness to that. All characters in this unfortunate tragedy suffer in their way. There are no winners in this story, that's for sure, but there is hope and lots of it.

"Life tests us all in different ways, and the tree that knows how to bend stands tall at the end of the storm. You went through a storm, a cyclone, a whirlwind, but you withstood all the assaults and the pain, and now you stand here a decade later, taller and richer through the experience of this divine tragedy. It could have been worse. It could have been that you would have been dead, but your father would have lived. Imagine the plight of your old father having to live through life with his only son dead and murdered. What would it have been like for him? It would have been hell. Imagine still that both of you would have been murdered that fateful night. Then what? Vijay would have made the victory walk to your flat, and he and Simran would live there permanently. They would have sold it off years later and shared the spoils of their riches. Vijay would have gone on killing, identifying rich bakers, and then slaughtering them one by one; he would have gone on making his killing unhindered by the law. That would have been even worse." Kadam told me during many of our conversations:

"I guess it was nature taking its course; existence gives you the best results all the time, and this was the best that could have happened out of all the other permutations and combinations," I replied that I was still thinking of my slain father. I also thought about the plight of senior citizens in Mumbai. My father was sixty-seven when he was brutally killed, and now, after a decade, crime in Mumbai against senior citizens has increased by thirty-one percent. From 2016 to 2019, six hundred and twelve senior citizens have been killed in Mumbai alone for financial gain. Crime against senior citizens in Mumbai has increased by 18% and 8% in Maharashtra. Things have not improved but seem to have worsened for Mumbai's older people.

"Senior citizens being killed by their servants has also gone up; in most cases, the servants kill them and steal and rob them. The police have asked the elderly to register the names of their servants with the police and be vigilant, yet the crimes against seniors have gone unabated, and that is a sad state of affairs." I informed Kadam.

"Where did you get all those figures from?" Kadam asked me.

"Oh! I was surfing the net and read a few articles on the crime rate in Maharashtra." I informed my friend, Gitesh Kadam.

"What about the all-India statistics?" Kadam asked me if I wanted to be more informed.

"Well, out of 20,532 IPC crimes under crime against senior citizens, the maximum number of cases were registered under cheating (1,867), followed by robbery (1,294 cases), murder (949 cases), and grievous bodily harm (949 cases), contributing 9.1%, 6.3%, 5.1%, and 4.6% of total such crimes during 2015, respectively." I gave Kadam the exact figure.

"I had been researching for my book on this crime series; that's why I know," I told Kadam innocently.

Chapter Seven: No Victim, No Motive, No Murder Weapon, No Crime

That was the one problem with Case 775. In a nutshell, you had a skull and eighteen animal bones. The skull was human, but who was the victim? What was the murder weapon? Or mode of murder, and what was the motive of the murder? No one had answers to all these questions. Till these questions remained, it was impossible to convict and nail Vijay Palande and his gang for the murder of anyone; it was plain and simple.

Until there is economic disparity in any society, there will be crimes. It's that simple. With so many poor and have-nots amongst us, the poor will take from the rich, and if they can't get it, they will commit crimes for it. Vijay Palande and his gang were the usual suspects, history sheeters who had committed severe crimes previously and had been convicted for their crimes; they just kept doing them again and again. For them, this was their world. Having done it so many times, there was no guilt factor attached to their crimes, nor did they show remorse for their murders; it was like another day at the office. All three, Dhananjay, Manoj, and Vijay, had serious crime histories, and Simran Sood had helped them in most of their endeavors as the seductive honey trap trading secrets of their victims.

This had been going on for decades. The gang had benefited and made money from their crimes and also shared their booty with the cops, who in turn would help them escape from jails, get parole, and even be lenient with the entire group as long as the booty was being shared equally. Who cared who went missing and who was buried in the ghats? It was all in a day's work. With corrupt cops and an underworld nexus, as well as politicians, it was a merry party amongst friends who just scratched each other's backs as, one after other, victims were identified, tracked, befriended, and then killed for their wealth and belongings. The entire thing was an assembly line process like in a factory; the only difference was that this was a death factory where bodies were chopped up, heads cut off, and skulls and bones packed in body bags were disposed of in get-away cars, finally to be thrown into the plunging cliffs and ravines of the Chiplun area in Satara district.

These professionals knew how the justice system worked, and having gone through the process so many times, they knew how to grease its wheels and what points to raise during a murder trial. It was simple; they had murdered so many people that it was like a routine for them. These mother fuckers were getting their kicks by beating the law and mocking the justice system. As poor victims' families watched their shameless games from the sidelines, their hands bound by the law

"I was so angry. I could have killed Vijay Palande there and then, but I just controlled myself." Harish Kakkad had said to a journalist when the cops had taken him to the ghats looking for his murdered brother's body parts. The law is meant to protect the victim, but the victim's hands are tied as the criminals mock the law and make an ass of the system so openly and blatantly. In this murder spree, Mumbai looked in shock and shame as the system was once again questioned.

The dance of death that took place in 2012 left skeletons, skulls, and decapitated bodies tumbling out of Vijay Palande's closet. The horror was so intense that even after ten years, its stains were visible on the souls of the people it impacted the most. The victims had no choice but for the wheels of justice to grind and give them some relief and closure.

"You see, I can't put the entire blame on guys like Manoj and Dhananjay; they were just poor kids from slums and economically deprived areas of Mumbai. For them, living in a jail is as good as living in their slum dwellings. But it is Vijay Palande and his devious plan that led to the killing spree; the courts will take cognizance of that. If there is one man who deserves to hang the most out of the entire gang, it is Vijay; he should not be spared." Kadam told me many times.

"How has that man lived this long after committing so many crimes? It's a big question mark on our judicial system as well." I lamented.

"I just can't imagine chopping a human body. My sister was a doctor; she used to dissect human bodies in hospitals. I guess these guys get used to it; it must have been difficult for Vijay and co. to cut up the bodies of Ranjan Das and Anup Das, but then later, it would have become a habit for them, all part of the routine as it were." I said to keep the conversation going.

"Every serial killer goes through six phases: aura, trolling, wooing, capture, and depression. The aura phase is when he fantasizes about his acts, thinking of sexual acts in his childhood. He is working and deepening his fantasies in his mind. Here, he gets withdrawn from society and becomes antisocial; he numbs his senses with drugs and alcohol, eventually reaching a point where he has to act out his fantasies. In the trolling phase, the serial killer is looking for victims; he searches for locations and places for the person he wants to enact his fantasy on. The wooing phase is when the killer establishes contact with his victim and establishes trust by being nice and overtly friendly with the victim; he doesn't let him know or get a whiff of his dangerous motives. In the capture phase, the killer's mask comes off, and he captures his victim. He looks them up and takes silver complete control. Now he does whatever he wants with them according to his fantasies: torture, rape, kill, murder, and decapitation. Some serial killers like to stay with the bodies of their victims and indulge in sexual acts and necrophilia. They get great sexual satisfaction and pleasure from killing and often keep trophies from their victims. After the fantasy of the killer is over, he gets depressed. The thrill of the kill is over. That is the depressive stage, or the last stage, of the serial killer. It is said that the most accessible victims of the serial killer are prostitutes, and most kill their victims through strangulation." Kadam informed me as if he were already a PhD in the subject.

"Wow! You seem to be reading an encyclopedia on serial killing; how do you know so much on the subject?" I asked him, rather amused at his vast knowledge of the subject.

"Well, this is the case for one, and I watch a lot of sh*t on Netflix," Kadam replied casually.

"But I am still surprised how a man like Vijay Palande became a serial killer; he looked so likable and normal to me when I met him for the first time, and he gave me no indication that I should be weary or suspicious of him," I asked Gitesh Kadam.

"He did not let you know; he was in the wooing phase with you. It was too late when his mask of civility fell; by that time, your dad was already dead. We made inquiries into his past. Vijay left home in his teenage years; he ran away because his family did not treat him well and stayed away from them for quite some time. Most serial killers have a dysfunctional childhood devoid of love and respect, which is why they lose their empathy at an early age." Gitesh Kadam informed me.

"See, for sure, Vijay Palande showed no remorse for his acts; we did Narco and lie detector tests on him and even did brain mapping, but he gave us no clues or straight answers; nothing concrete came out of the tests. The doctors said, like most serial killers, Palande had no empathy. The part of the brain that is built for empathy, remorse, or guilt was missing in his brain; there were no electrical impulses in that side of the brain. This is another trait of a serial killer; their brains

are hardwired very differently from those of common folks like us." Gitesh Kadam told me to shed more light on this complex subject.

"The sheer deviance of the man imagine mixing wrong skulls with animal bones to scuttle investigations. It's as if Vijay was mocking the entire justice system." I said as my thoughts meandered to the horrible and dreadful days of April 2012.

"We will never know how many more people he has killed, but I am sure many more skeletons are lying in some pit in the Kumbharli Ghats somewhere near Chiplun," Gitesh replied.

"Till then, we will all have to witness the court drama and go through endless hearings, which will finally lead to no conclusions," I affirmed.

"I don't think we will ever know the true identity of the fifth unknown victim, and that skull will keep lying in court waiting for someone to own it finally," Gitesh spoke in a reflective tone, sounding slightly jaded and tired.

"You know, it all looked so frivolous at that time—snorting cocaine, fucking women, drinking booze, and sleeping till the wee hours of the morning—that was my life in Mumbai. I would never know how it ended up with such a big tragedy. Things just spiraled and went downhill, and then no one was in control of the situation; no one was in charge. The incident took over, and everyone connected lost total control." I explained that I was reminiscing.

"It must be hell on earth, a real nightmare, I suppose," Kadam said she was still sympathetic towards me.

"Well, I fell numb for a few days. Mujhey tho pata nahi chala ki mein kab pakda gaya aur kab chooth gaya. The entire incident was like a buzz for me, like being thrown off a running train. Things happened so fast; people were sleeping on wooden planks and hard wooden tables, and the cops sometimes put a newspaper on them. I always had one cop holding my hand, even at night. My entire back had become stiff, and my left side was paralyzed with shock and pain. I remember it. It was so dark; there was no light in my room. I didn't eat for a few days. I was scared, you know, going to the loo; they stank of piss and puke. I didn't eat because I didn't want to crap." I went on to relive the horrors of 2012.

"What about that friend of yours, Mithilesh Tiwari? Where was he?" Kadam asked.

"Oh! The cops had taken him to Satara to look for me. The police suspected that I was also dead and that the gang had grown my body somewhere on the way to Goa. They were checking with the Goa police if they saw a dead body floating around the beach. He spent two days looking for me. They finally found me in Chiplun in Palande's guest house. I was unaware of the incident and the trail of mayhem left behind." I replied tentatively.

"Wo Tiwari ko bolna uska testimony bhi hei, he will have to come to Mumbai to take a stand, but it will be only for a day, not very long." Kadam reminded me.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, and this story is certainly bizarre. Sab masala hei is kahani mein, thoda jhoot ka tadka aur maar do, it will be the greatest crime thriller ever." Kadam smiled and told me

"You know, faith is a huge thing. When I was at the Oshiwara Police Station, I would go to the mandir; they had a temple inside the station. I would go there and pray, as that was my only solace. Except for prayers, I had nothing in those days. I had lost everything, and my shoulders had stopped lower than ever. Then I would have cops come to me and shout, Is kutte ko phansi ke Pandey tak pahunchana hei, ap ko baap ki maut ka badla Dena hei, Abhi tho leader shuru hui hai?" I told Kadam as images of my past flashed past my fragile mind again and again.

"Akal mrityu, that's what my dad suffered. You know, I traveled to all the Char Dhams to Vishnoo Devi and Amarnath to do pooja for my slain father. I even did a yagna for him in Kumbh Ka Mela. The guilt inside me is like a gaping hole. No matter how much I repent, the whole thing gets bigger with time. I want it so badly to disappear, but it just keeps reoccurring, haunting me from the inside and eating me up from within. I don't think I will ever be able to get over my father's death, not in this lifetime, at least." I told Kadam with moist eyes and a choking throat.

"Jeevan aur Maran sab upar wale ke hath mein hai, you had to live, and your dad had to die; it had been written that way. You are a writer, I know, but Uparawala is the greatest writer of them all, and he is the one who is writing our scripts. You had to live in his scheme of things, so you did." Kadam said it very philosophically.

"Uski script mein Palande ke planning nahi chalti; I think Vijay has discovered that by now. He must have enough time now to think about where he went wrong in

his plan and how he managed to land up in the Anda cell." Kadam said, further pushing home the point that the upar wala is writing the scripts of our destiny.

"Khopdi, Dhad, Kakal, it looks like a story from Sham Shan in Banaras; you know, the ghats in Banaras where you have the funeral piers burning," Kadam said she was trying to make some comparison.

"Yes, the only difference is that this was the Kumbharli Ghats of Chiplun, but it was a graveyard alright," I said, closing my eyes, trying to comfort my soul by taking deep breaths.

"This kind of incident humbles you; it ate away my ego, my false pride, everything; it showed me how fickle and fragile life is. In one incident, I saw death from so close that I woke up to the ultimate reality that is death, and that is a very sobering experience indeed." I told Kadam, further expanding on my feelings and my learning from the gruesome killing spree of Palande and his gang.

"Palande is suffering in his hell in prison; he is hardly safe inside. There are so many rival gangs gunning for his flesh and blood. Age will eat him up as time passes, and the new dons on the horizon will marginalize him. Once the body is old, you can't fight as hard as when you were young. Time will exact its revenge on Palande, and you can rest assured that his ego and pride have also been obliterated." Kadam told them I was trying to soothe my old, aching wounds.

"Yes, I am sure his pride has taken a battering," I replied

"Anyway, you should not feel so sad; you lived to tell the tale, and now, with the book you are writing on this sordid tale, you will well and truly turn your

misfortune into fortune. You will make much money from selling the IPR rights for season two. Now that's what you call bouncing back from your failures." Kadam laughed as he said this.

"Ya! But it is difficult to keep stretching the story; something dramatic must happen for me to write a season two for this tale." I said

"Kya hua kuch fiction kuch nonfiction." Use your imagination, too; crime writing is all about. You think the Mahabharata and Ramayana are based on absolute truth and facts." Kadam said

"No, they are myths, which means they are part truth and part fiction. That is their beauty; the sages who wrote these tales have also put some of their imagination and feelings into them, and their myth increases as time goes by and they are handed down from generation to generation. Each generation adds something new to these myths, which are renewed over time." I explained to Kadam.

"You mean after a century, your story on your dad's murder case will also become an epic?" Kadam said with a smile.

"Well, it already has become a legendary tale, but I can't see the ending yet; there is still time for the tale to end. We have to wait till the fate of Palande is finally decided, and there is still time for that." I explained.

"That will be season three and season four then. After killing your dad and you, you will make more money selling your books—content rights that Palande hoped to make from you. Uska tho itna bada chukka cat gaya. Now, you will make money from his misfortune just the way he wanted to make money from yours. Life does its justice in its freaky way. He is in a hell hole in a anda cell as you roam the world writing books and profiting from a tale that he had crafted." Kadam saw the twist in my fortune and the beauty of my tale.

"Anyway, what is truth? Everyone has their truth. You know that story of the elephant and the blind men? Have I told you that story?" I asked Kadam.

"No, you have not heard the tale," Kadam said.

"Well, in a village full of blind men, an elephant once arrived. Now, the men were all blind, so they could not figure out what animal or thing it was. One blind man touched the elephant's legs and said it was a huge iron pillar. The other tugged at the elephant's tail and said it seemed like a rope. Yet another blindfolded man touched the ears and said it was a fan of some sort. One touches its trunk and says it's a serpent. No one sees the entire elephant, as each man has his own view of life and beliefs. "None of them could see the elephant as a whole; they all saw it in parts," I explained the entire tale to Kadam.

"So what is the moral of the story?" Kadam asked.

"The truth is relative to one's perspective, and because the truth is relative, we all should respect the opinion of others," I explained to Kadam.

"Tho iska Matlab Vijay Palande ek hathi hei aur hum sab police wala andha log, koi sala uka pooch pakad raha hei aur koi uski soondh pakad raha hei," Kadam added a touch of dark humor to the tale.

""Sala! "Es hathi ko abhi marney mein bahut time hei, government jail ka khana Kha Kha kar wo Palande hathi ki tarhan mota ho gaya hei par marta nahi sala." I said glumly to Kadam.

""Wo Salla! Rakshas hei bhasmasura wala rakshas." I proclaimed

" Han! Par is baar wo galti kiya usne apna haath apke sar par rakh diya, aur wo khudh hei raakh ho gaya, ha ha ha." Kadam said with a laugh that it was frightening.

"Itne logon ko mara wo, par mujehy maar nahi saka puri planning ke baad bhi." I said it as if thinking aloud.

"Tho iska Matlab aap ussey bhi bada Rakshas hoga phir." Kadam said with a twinkle in his eye.

End Of Kisi Ki Khopdi Kisi Ka Dhad

Kis Kis Ne Simran Ki Li

The Honey Trap from Hell

Kis Kis Ne Simran Ki Li is part of the "Yes sir; I killed my dad" hexalogy. The book is written from the perspective of Simran Sood as she narrates her story that finally led to the killing spree of Vijay Palande and his gang in Mumbai in 2012. The woman labeled as the honey Tarp from hell narrates her life and shares her story as to how she became the Femme Fatal who trapped Anuj Tikku and Karan Kakkad and became a co-conspirator with Vijay Palande in all his gruesome crimes.

Chapter one: Aisi Lagi Lagan Seema ho Gayi Simran

"Yeh! Meri kahani hai haan yeh meri dastan hai, ab tak aap mujhey puri tarhan se na jaan sake na smajh sake. Mere kayi roop hai aur kayi naam. Par jab maine hosh smabhala mere ghar walon ne mujey ek hi naam diya. "Seema" yeh mera pehla naam tha aur mera pehla roop. Seema Dusaj aur maine Ludhiana mein janam liya ek teacher family mein." Seema stared at the mirror when she spoke these words to it. She was combing her hair and slowly talking to the mirror as she tied her hair in a knot. Seema Dusaj was a young, skinny teenage girl with hazel green eyes and long brown hair that could be shaped into a ponytail, bun, or choti. She has loved to groom herself ever since she was a little girl. She had been told she was special and felt she was meant for more incredible things and fame.

Ludhiana was where Seema spent her formative years and grew up as a teenager. Her father, **Sukh Dev Dusaj**, was a professor in Botany at the **Punjab Agricultural University**, and her mother, **Dimple Dusaj**, was a Chemistry teacher at the **Arya College**, a famous college solid in its science department. Seema had a younger brother, Surya Dev Dusaj, studying at the local school. So her roots were very working-class; money was tight, and the family ran on a tight budget, but their basic needs of food and shelter were always met. His university had given Sukh Dev a two-bedroom quarter, and the family stayed near the Punjab University campus. It was their tiny home; her mother took tuition when the money was tight and was a very hardworking woman. She would make dinner and breakfast for all, then get to the college to attend her lectures. She would take tuition on the weekend and take care of all the needs of her two loving kids. They were steeped in lower-income, middle-class family culture. They were given middle-class values and were required to study hard and join a profession. Seema had always been told to concentrate on her studies and get a respectable desk job after college. Marriages are significant for a woman. After getting your first job, we will contact you married to a suitable groom who can keep you well. That is all I want for you in life." Dimple Dusaj would tell Seema, as if trying to brainwash her, that kids can be brainwashed like this by parents, and by repeating her words, she was trying to instill her middle-class values in her daughter.

Seema grew up as an ordinary girl. Who loved to dress up in frocks and wear flowers in her hair and would often play with her fellow girlfriends in College Park.

She could have been a better student, as she often got lost during her classes. She would try to concentrate, but her mind would be somewhere else. "Seema had a problem with concentration. I have noticed that she gets lost and often loses the sense of time. Looking out from the window is her best pastime. Sometimes, she keeps her head on the table and sleeps. I suggest you give her a pair of reading glasses. She has weak eyesight, and spectacles may help her concentrate and remain focused in class." Said Professor Khera, one of Seema's teachers, to her mother, Dimple.

That was when Seema got her reading glasses. She was only fourteen years old then and had been burdened by her first pair of spectacles. "Seema, you have to study hard in class; your professor Khera complained about your lack of attention. Please ensure you always wear your glasses in class; they are costly at Rs. 1500. That's my two-month tuition fee. You have to pass college and get a job to support the family. Life is tough for us; every day is a struggle, baby. Now, be a good girl and listen to your mother. I want only the best for my daughter." Dimple informed her daughter, Seema. So, it was settled that Seema was to get a new pair of glasses that she would wear to school.

"See, look straight at the wall and tell me the letters in the last line." The eye specialist in the spectacle shop, Eye **Spot**, told Seema during her eye test. "I am looking at the chart for the letters Z, P, O, and F." Seema read from the eye chart with one eye closed. "OK, very good. I will give you new glasses and see if these feel better." The eyes specialist at the shop gave Seema a new pair of glasses to read with. "Yes, now it's even better and clearer," Seema said, affirming that she liked the new pair of glasses. "OK, that's great. You are shortsighted; that's why there is a strain on your forehead and temple. We will give you this pair; it's perfect, or you."

The specialist explained this to Seema. "Doctor, make two pairs, one of which I will keep with me just in case she breaks her glasses," Dimple told the eye specialist. Like a dutiful mother, Dimple paid the money for the glasses. "Now make sure you wear them, Seema; I don't want to hear any more complaints about you from Professor Khera in the parent-teacher meeting," Dimple told her daughter. "This is very hard-earned money; you know how hard I and your father work to give you a basic standard of living. You owe us as parents." Dimple further drilled her working-class values into her daughter. All the while, Seema seemed

subdued; she felt like she had done something wrong and was caged and stifled by her mother. "I will do well in school, mummy; I will study hard and not let you and Papa down." Seema Dusaj replied.

Seema grew up as a subdued child; she kept to herself in school and came back to her home in time. Like many teenage girls in school, she did not have a boyfriend. But she really enjoyed getting lost in her thoughts and staring at the sky during lunch breaks. What she wanted most was singing. She would listen to old Bollywood tunes during breaks, break into a melody, and sing her heart out in the college garden. Yes, yes, our little Seema had a hidden talent, and that was singing to herself. "Tum a gaye ho to noor a gaya hai." One of her favorite numbers is from Aandhi, a super hit film that starred Sanjeev Kumar. She bought a cassette player by saving up from the pocket money that her father gave her. She would buy Bhajan Cassettes and listen to Anuradha Porwal singing Durga Arti on her cassette player. She liked spiritual music and was a great fan of Gulshan Kumar. The T-series tapes were cheap and cost less than most cassettes sold during that time in the market, and Seema could afford to buy a few every month; that was her hobby but was slowly becoming her obsession. Apart from the garden, she would often go to the roof of her tiny quarter and sing aloud. That was her Riaz, but now she was only an amateur showing a keen interest in singing. Her friends in college would be very amused by her antics, and Burt also enjoyed her singing. Seema had a bubbly, effervescent voice; she could also modulate it after some practice. She was also a keen learner and often listened to other singers on her tape, trying to catch their Antara and Mukhda.

"Pagli ho gayi hai munda, gana gati rehti hai, padhai mein koi dyaan nahi iska." Dimple's mother often told her father, who would nod and let the matter go. But it was confirmed that as she grew up, Seema would remain submerged in her own make-believe world. We should get her married off after she finishes college; there is no point waiting longer." Dimple had told her father, Sukh Dev.

On the other hand, Seema did not care; she was getting immersed in her new love, singing. She would buy tapes and learn how other singers modulated their voices, and she started to learn about singing and its many nuances. But she needed to spend a few hours a day training her voice and learning modulation. She even bought a medical book that taught her to strengthen her voice chord

and be more powerful. She would gargle every day with hot lime water and honey. "Mummy, I love singing; it gives me joy. I love it and feel I have a talent for it." Seema told her mother, Dimple, that her mummy constantly nagged her and wanted to do what she liked. "I got new spectacles for you so you can concentrate in class, and now you are distracting yourself with singing. Stop deluding yourself; no one in our family has become a singer. Just concentrate on your studies and get a job. Try to become a teacher like me. That's the best profession for a woman in Punjab." Dimple's mother would try to make her see reality. "Dreams are not for poor, middle-class people like us, and singing is a waste of time. How will you earn money from it? Will you dance and sing in bars and seedy places? I have not bought up my daughter to become a prostitute or a call girl; that's what happens to girls who finally venture into this sort of profession." Dimple told her only daughter, Seema. But Seema Dusaj had none of it; she had found her calling. She had now decided that college was not her future; she wanted to sing her way to fame and get out of her current rut. She seemed to enjoy spiritual music and found singing bhajans the easiest. She felt she was worshipping the Lord through spiritual songs and devotional bhajans. She wanted to sing bhajans because she thought it most suited her type of voice.

Her good friend **Roshini Roy** encouraged her to dream and follow her passion. Roshini was her classmate, a Bengali girl. She was a heartthrob; her large eyes and glowing copper-like skin would make many heads turn in school. "See, I am all for it. You have a right to choose what you want to do in life. No matter what I think, ignoring your parents would help. Just follow your dreams." Roshini had egged on Seema all the time. "Ya! But I don't know where to start; it is all too confusing. I feel alone and lost all the time." Seema complained to her best friend.

"I have just the thing for you; look at this ad." Saying that, she thrust a woman's magazine called *Save* in front of Seema. "Auditions are happening for a singing crew for Anup Jalota's troupe. See this advertisement. They also have a name for the event: **"The Bhajan Kings and Queens of Ludhiana."** It's a perfect opportunity for you. You must apply and give an audition. Maybe you will make it to the final." Roshni Roy clasped her hands with delight. She looked more excited at the prospect than her friend Seema Dusaj. "I don't know. Mummy doesn't want me to sing, and Papa doesn't care; he doesn't go against my mother." Seema said it rather soulfully.

"Look, dear off, you need to move up in life and live your dreams. You will have to be a rebel. All rebels go against the tide. Don't listen to naysayers. Just follow your passion. If you are true to it, it will lead you somewhere." Roshini Roy said she was trying to pep up her dearest friend at school. "Arrey, how long will you keep singing on the rooftop and in collie gardens? People already think you are mad. I don't think your life should be caged within the confines of a classroom. You are like a free bird, ready to sing. You need to take up the challenge and have nothing to lose, my darling." Roshni said she was being very persistent; she could feel that Seema was stifled by her current situation. It took a few hours of convincing, but finally, Seema agreed to go for the audition, and they tried their luck.

"Hello Ji! Anup Jalota troupe, ji, I want to come and give an audition. I want to be part of your bhajan troupe. Can you tell me where I need to come for the trials?" I called a phone number mentioned at the bottom of the advertisement. "Yes! Yes, we are open for auditions. We have a studio at 21 Model Town Road. You can come at 6:00 p.m., and we will prepare the music room for your audition. By the way, what Bhajan would you be singing? The secretary of the troupe, a man named **Bhajan Pal**, tried to answer Seema's queries. "Well, I have not prepared much, but since this is an **Anup Jalota** trip, I would like to sing **Aisi Lagi Lagan**, one of the most famous bhajans Anup sir has ever sung," Seema replied confidently. "Oh! That is a perfect choice, and it would be great to hear you at the audition. We have a few places left, so don't come late." Bhajan Pal instructed Seema, who sounded equally excited about joining a Bhajan Troupe.

"That's great, yaar! I am happy that you have taken the first step, but you have a week till the audition. You should practice the Bhajan you would be singing; you need some preparation first." Roshni Roy said she knew she had to encourage Seema; otherwise, she could not make it.

"I need to do my Riaz diligently till the date of the auditions, and I need to have hot garlic and honey water to keep my throat in prime condition. I will tell you that I will practice the Bhajan for a few days and then sing for you. You can tell me how good or bad I am. That way, I will improve." Seema roped in her best friend, Roshni Roy, to help her out with the auditions. She now felt it was a good idea and might help her life take a new turn and turn a new page. For the next four days, Seema sat on the balcony at night, singing to the night sky. She would

modulate her voice, clap her hands, and then sing the Bhajan, "Asi lags Lagan.' She would then repeat the first few lines again and again until she got it right. She practiced hard and even listened to some Anup Jalota bhajans through her cassette player. She would dance in the college and school gardens, singing to herself. Most bystanders were amused looking at her, engrossed in her song, but they let her be.

Her professor, Khera, was livid that she did not attend any of his classes; the man marked her absent throughout the week. "I had told her mother she is not interested in my classes; even after getting her spectacles made, she can't concentrate, and now she is singing Bhajans all over the campus area. That girl, Seema, is in her dream world; she knows when she will land on the ground. It is not wise for her to become a dreamer and only look at the sky, not at this tender age.' Khera had remarked to his fellow teachers. But Seema Dusaj didn't care what people said; she had developed a thick skin at school and home, and the nagging wads weren't affecting her. She had an audition to perform in, and she desperately wanted to be part of the Anup Jalota troupe. The fire that her friend had lit turned into hot flames, and to her surprise, she was sinning like a canary now. Her singing reverberated through the open sky of her balcony.

"I know this is my big chance. I can now feel it; my voice has picked up a nice tempo. I think I am ready to give you a performance." Seema told her friend Roshni Roy, "Ok, then sing in front of me, sing, and let me see how you sound." Roy egged her on.

In a flash, Seema cleared her throat and started to sing the Bhajan she had rehearsed. "Asi Lagi Lagan Meera ho gayi Magan wo tho Hari Hari gun gunaney lagi." Seema sang the first Antara of the Bhajan. She then picked up the pitch and the tempo and gave it everything. Her song was rhythmic and classy, and soon, even Roshni Roy got engrossed and started to clap with both hands.

Seema had a hidden talent; she just took off with the Bhajan, singing it with all her force and might until she built it into a crescendo. "Wah! Wah! Mazza Gaya, excellent. You have practiced hard, it seemed. It was so pure in your voice and the way you picked up the tempo. Seema, I am impressed." Roshni Roy proclaimed it to Seema Dusaj.

"Now you must ensure you impress the legendary Anup Jalota and keep your nerve; don't get nervous at all." Roshni gave her some sound advice. "You think I am that good?" Seema asked her beloved friend, "Yes, you sang the Bhajan. I am impressed." Roshni replied, further boosting her confidence.

"Now get some good sleep and have some homey lemon water so your voice is crisp and clear before the audition. You have the details of the venue, I suppose." Roshni asked Seema. Yes, yes, I got the details. I called the troupe up, and their manager, Bhajan Pal, informed me of the location of the auditions. It's in a music studio in Model Town. I got the address." Seema Dusaj replied with a faint smile on her face. She felt quietly confident after her friend's approval.

"Do you think I should tell my mother and papa about the audition?" Seema asked Roshni for further guidance. "No, don't do that; they will only nag you and disapprove of it. Your family is very middle-class and narrow-minded; they will not like this as it is; they don't think much of your singing and dancing. Just let it be for now. You can inform them if you get through and get a place in the troupe. Now is not the time." Roshni gave her honey advice to her friend.

Seema felt confident; she thought she could get a place in the Bhajan Group and was ready to take on the world. She got up early on the audition day, gargled with hot lemon water, and did her Riaz for a few hours on her balcony. It was small but enough for her to pace and sing her bhajans. There were some butterflies in her stomach, but she could keep her nerve during the day. "Mummy, I am attending a friend's birthday party in the evening. I will be back after dinner, so don't wait for me. I will be back by eight, so don't worry much." Seema told her mother Dimple that she knew she could not tell her folks she was going for a Bhajan singing audition for the famous Anup Jalota troupe.

At five in the evening, she stepped out of her father's teacher's quarter and took an auto towards Model Town. She had a date with destiny, but at that point, Seema did not know that her life would take a significant turn and things would not be the same for her.

She arrived at the music studio quickly and headed straight for the main gate. Soon, she was standing on the porch of a double-story building. It was time to maintain her composure, and she did just that. Seema rang the doorbell

somewhat tentatively. "Hello Ji! I am Seema Dusaj. I am here to give a Bhajan audition. I saw your advertisement in Savvy Magazine. Am I at the right place?" Seema inquired from a short, dark man with a receding hairline. "Yes! Yes, you are in the right place. I am Bhajan Pal. I am Anup Sir's manager, and I am also looking after the auditions and briefing the contestants. Please come in; we have been waiting for you." Dying, Bhajan Pal asked Seema to come right in.

Seema stepped into a large hall with blue and emerald green curtains on the windows and two large sofa sets for people to sit on. Seema saw four contestants seated in the hall and waiting for the auditions to begin. "Hi! I am Seen Dusaj. I am here to sing and give my audition." Seema tried to make polite conversation with the girl seated on the sofa. "Hello ji, I am Manmeet. I am also here for the audition. They will start in a few minutes. By then, you can rehearse the Bhajan you plan to sing. See, see, I have got my song on a piece of paper. I need to remember my lyrics occasionally, so I write down the lyrics and wordings of my bhajans. I will be singing the Shiva Arti, and my favorite is that I am a Shiva Bhakta," Manmeet replied, trying to make Seema comfortable. 'Come sit down with me. There's no need to tire yourself by pacing around; you need to focus.' Manmeet further told Seema.

Seema sat comfortably on the sofa, and soon, Bhajan Pal appeared. "What will you be singing, my Dera? What Bhajan will you sing?" Bhajan Pal asked Seema. "Well, I will be singing Asi Lagi Lagan. Meera Ho Gayi Magan, that's a favorite bhajan of Anup sir, isn't it?" Seema explained to Pal

"Yes, that is a good number. We are just getting the microphone ready for you. There will be a sound engineer to help you in the studio. We have someone giving their audition; when that is through, we will take you." Bhajan Pal explained it, too, Seema.

Seema had no choice but to wait for her turn. To pass the time, she closed her eyes and started to sing her Bhajan in a low tone. She felt transported to another divine and pure world when she began to sing. It was very relaxing and helped her subdue her jingling nerves.

"Come, madam Seema. We will record you singing the Bhajan. You will get enough time to give retakes if we are not satisfied. Come now, come into the music room." Bhajan Pal asked Seema to move into the music studio. She sat on

the wooden stool in front of the microphone, and the sound engineer ensured the acoustics were perfect for her. He then fiddled with his recording machine and fine-tuned the woofers and speakers.

"You need to stay six inches away from the mike and clear your throat when you start; I don't want pops and hisses when you sing.' The sound engineer gave his instructions to Seema. Then he snapped his fingers and, at the count of three, asked Seema to start singing her Bhajan. Seema was attentive throughout, and on cue, she began to hum and then went full throttle into her song. "Asi lagi lagan meera h gayi magan wo tho Hari Hari gun gunnaney lagi, meera ho gayi magan." Seema went on to sing with confidence a few minutes into the famous Bhajan. She lost herself in the song and could not feel or hear anything except the melodious tune of her Bhajan and song. She was fully engrossed and focused on the music, her voice flying to every studio corner. The woofers were on full tempo, and even the sound engineer got into the act; he was shaking his head from side to side as if on Stacy or in a trance, and occasionally, he would move forward to steady Seema's microphone so that his hisses would not spoil the recording of her Bhajan.

"Let's do one more, Seema madam. I want to get the audition perfect. You sing very well. I must say, are you doing arts at college, by the way?" The sound engineer asked Seema Dusaj. "Yes, I am a fine arts student and have also taken painting, but music is my real passion. How do you think I sound?" Seema sent the sound engineer hesitantly. "Very good, you have a gift. I take hundreds of auditions every month, but I can tell you, your voice is very melodious but a bit raw. As you go along, you will get even better." The sound engineer said he was parsing Seema's talent.

"Ok, I will give it a few more takes and get it perfect this time," Seema said, singing her favorite Bhajan again.

Seema Dusaj went on to give three takes, and her recording went on for over an hour. She also got a lot of support from Bhajan Pal, who was keenly watching her gestures as she sang her song.

"Madam, I like your style and how you move your hands and head while you sing; it also gives the Bhajan much-needed pep and excitement. That's what we need:

excitement. That's what entertains people. It may be a Bhajan, but you must consider the audience. That is the only way we will get a whole house while Anup sir performs with his troupes. Seema felt light; she was tense initially but thought she had performed well. She started to feel that she could get her chance to perform with the legendary Bhajan singer Anup Jalota.

Chapter Two: "Sabse Pehle Anup Jalota Ne Meri Li

Seema Dusaj stood silently in the hall area. She was pleased with her performance at the audition and felt light and somewhat satisfied. The effort had taken its toll; she was sweating and asked a lady standing in the queue for a glass of water. She wanted to clear her parched throat, which had dried up due to her sinful efforts. After that, she steadied herself and clawed at the sweat on her brow. She had given her all at the audition, which had taken a physical toll on her.

'Seema ji bravo! Bravo! You sang very well. You have a great chance. I know Anup sir and his tastes. I am sure you will get your first break here with us. I will have Anup sir hear your taped audition. I was also filming you with my camera from the side, so more than your voice, sir will see your gestures, hand movements, and how you shake your head while you sing. Sir is very particular about how his female singers approach the audience. You are also good-looking and young, which will have an added impact. I know I should not ask, but what is your age?" Bhajan Pal asked Seema. "Sir, I am nineteen years old. I am a Gemini born in May." Seema replied with hesitance.' Oh! Great Gemini are great singers. You have a talent that I have seen a lot. Now everything will be decided by Sir Anup Jalota, and he is a man who pays attention to details." Bhajan went on.

"Sir, how long will it take for you to declare the results? Hundreds would have come to audition for a place with your troupe. Seema asked the secretary, Bhajan Pal.

"Yes, we have taken many auditions today and will finish around a dozen. We have been auditioning since seven in the morning today. We will take a few weeks for sure to make up our mind. Sir will go through all the auditions, and then only we can decide. But don't worry, we have a grading system, and sir has a great intuition for talent. We will let you know in a few weeks. I will be in touch for sure either way." Bhajan Pal issued Seema, who looked at him with soulful eyes.

"Seema Ji's personality is essential for a singer; she needs to have oomph and style, and I have seen both in you. Sir is a good trainer and works hard on his talents." Bhajan explained to Seema Ji, I will be waiting for the results of the audition. Thank you. I hope Anup sir will approve of my singing style." Saying that

Seema took her leave and walked out of the studio into the street to take an auto back to her father's humble teachers' quarter.

Seema remained pensive and uptight for the next few days. She had given a good audition, but she was not sure she would make the cut and get the opportunity to sing for the Anup Jalota Bhajan troupe. "Arrey, don't worry, you did a good job. I am sure you will get your big life break this time. Just cross your fingers." Roshni Roy Seema's best friend tried to encourage her.

"If I get my chance here, it will be a turning point. I will get to perform in front of a crowd, which will build my confidence, and who knows, one day, people will buy my cassettes and listen to my voice. I Have talent, that's for sure, but now others have to acknowledge my talent as well." Seema said, "Just have faith, girl. I know your mother, Dimple, disapproves of your singing talents, but they might change their mind when they see you as part of the Bhajan troupe." Roshni replied.

"Seema, see, we are working-class people. You need to finish your arts degree and then take up a job, say as a company secretary or a teacher. That way, you can earn an honest living and help the family. These dreams of being a famous Bhajan singer are only dreams; they will not be able to feed you or put food on the table. Listen to me; I am your mother and will only show you the right path." Dimple said it like a concerned mother.

Seema Dusaj would listen to her mother, but her mind and heart were elsewhere. She knew her future was not behind a company desk but on a stage performing for the masses. She wanted to sing with joy and win the appreciation of her fans, but she had other plans for her life, and she knew she had a unique talent that would take her on a different path in life.

At the studio in Model Town, Anup Jalota had just arrived from a trip to the US. He had performed in New York and spent a few days in Europe. Although he had a hectic schedule, he knew he had to go through all the auditions to get a few girls for his Bhajan Mandali. "Sir, I have kept all the audition tapes in the music room. We have installed the speakers and woofers so you can listen to the singers and decide which is best for our troupe. We have auditioned more than three hundred people, around two hundred ladies and hundreds of men. They are a good mix, and you will see a variety of voices.

Anup Jalota was a tall and slightly heavy man. Now in his early fifties, he had slowed down a bit. The man was known in industry circles as a womanizer and an alcoholic. It was well known that he took two large pegs of whisky before he performed on stage; that itself was a sacrilege for somehow a man performing Bhajan's singing praises to the Lord could drink so heavily. People felt that a man like him, who had dedicated his life to performing bhajans, should have better morals. It was a well-known fact in the inner circle that Anup would often call ladies in his singing troupe to his chamber to have sex with him. He loved fucking women from his group and would often grant them favors like free trips abroad or a cassette deal for a sexual favor.

Presently, he was screwing **Jubilee Kumari**, a young, sexy female singer who was a part of his Bhajan Troupe. Jubilee had secured a contract with D-Series, a famous cassette company owned by the music baron **Suraj Kumar**. She had pleased Anup in bed, and he had duly reciprocated. He also gave her center stage to sing and perform during their international concerts. Anup was rich; many decades of singing had made him wealthy. He was driven in a white Mercedes Benz all around the city. He dressed only in a silk kurta and a Pashmina Shawl and smoked silk-cut cigarettes carefully placed in a gold cigarette case. The man was married and had two kids, but his sexual relationship with his wife was nonexistent, especially after the birth of their second child. Anup was a man of bottomless sexual appetite, and his appetite for women had only grown with age. He had slept with most of the women in his troupe, but his favorite girl was Jubilee Kumari, his adviser and confidant.

"Hear this, Ganesh Arti; a teenage girl has performed it with a lovely voice. What do you feel, Jubilee?" Anup asks Jubilee for her valuable advice. "Han! It's good, but her voice is low-pitched, and in a stage show, people seated at the back could not hear her well." Jubilee replied. Anup had parked himself in the studio and diligently listened to all the audition tapes. He had only a few weeks in which he had to select the best voices and give them a contract to sing for his troupe. He picked up another tape and played it aloud, then closed his eyes and listened attentively.

"This guy has a heavy, booming voice; he would be a good base; we can keep him in the corner and make him swing aloud. Pal Sahib, who is this singer?" Anup

asked Pal who would be helping him make his final decision. "Sir, that is Aslam Khan; he is a good singer, but I feel his voice is untrained and still raw; it lacks finesse." Bhajan Pal gave his two cents to his boss. "Aslam, no, no, how can we have a Muslim singing Bhajans that will not go well with our audience? No, no, no, remove him. Let's hear someone else give me some solid voice to listen to." Anup gave his instructions to Bhajan Pal.

"Sir, listen to this lady's very melodious voice. I feel she has a lot of talent. Her name is Seema Dusaj. You will like her high-pitched voice. I am sure you will listen to this tape." Saying that, Pal handed over the audition tape of Seema to Anup.

"Chalo! If you say so, let's listen to this lady." Anup gave his command, and Pal played the tape to his boss.

Suddenly, the melodious singing of Seema filled the studio air, and the atmosphere became calm and serene. Anup slowly closed his eyes and trained his ear on her voice. He wanted to catch her every word and mukhda, feel her soul, and grasp her rhythm; it was so wonderful and alive. After a long time, he had heard of someone who instantly captivated her. Anup listened to her audition more than

Five times, he could not get enough of her voice; it was very different and lyrical. "Wah! Wah! She sings like an angel and reads goddesses well; she is a true gem. Where is she from? Can I meet with her?" Anup asked his secretary, Bhajan Pal. "Yes, sir, Seema Dusaj is the daughter of a college professor; her mother is a teacher; she stays in the city; she came through the ad we had given in Savy Magazine; her talent also took me aback. I was sure you would approve of her Bhajan Singing talents. I was sure you would approve of her; she is very talented, but she needs a break only you can give her." Pal replied.

"Iski awaaz itni shandar hai tho yeh thud kitni shandar hogi." Anup remarked with a little bit of mischief in her voice. "I know your tastes, sir; why don't you see her too? I also filmed her with my video camera so you could see her visually. She is a treat to watch when she sings; her moves are very physical. There is a lot of latka Jhatka here." Bhajan Pal replied and started playing Seema's audition on the color TV in the music room so Anup could now see her performance. Seema's beauty stuck with Anup—her cat eyes, milky body, and slender frame. She was also tall, and in her red shalwar kameez, she looked apart. Instantly, he grabbed his crouch

and steadied his loins. He was engrossed just looking at her and soon realized that he wanted to have her. "Nagina hai yeh ladki Pal Babu, I like how she moves her hands and head. She will do very well singing with us. Pal babu, get her. I want to meet Seema and get to know her. I am impressed with what I have seen and heard." Anup instructed Bhajan Pal, who was ready to act on them promptly. Jubilee Kumari was seething from the inside. She did not like that Anup sir had taken a liking to Seema and was singing praises of her. Jubilee Kumari was Anup's wife and his mistress of sorts. She was his constant companion on his trips abroad and would share Anup Jalota's bed from time to time. She was also very good with the rubber electric dildo that she very efficiently used on Anup's erect penis to give him more excitement and pleasure, and indeed, she had given her mentor a lot of joy and fun over the years. Jubilee was scared that Anup was showing so much interest in a newcomer, a lady who had not even joined his troupe. She felt challenged and insecure. I mean, how could a novice suddenly get so much attention from Anup, whom she had served for years in bed as his concubine?

"Kya dekha apne is ladki ki awaaz mein itni Khas bhi nahi hai Seema." Jubilee trod to advise Anup. "No, no, I can see her talent; it's just how she moves and her modulation; it's unique. With some training and polishing, she could be the lead singer of our group. She is still a bit raw but has much potential, so I wish to meet her." Anup replied.

"Is it her voice or body you want to possess?" Jubilee Kumari replied and then smirked. "

"You have a one-track mind; I am tested on her talent and not in her body." Anup replied rather irritably, and Jubilee said, "You said that to me the first time, and then you slowly took me to your bed, don't you remember?" Jubilee replied to her mentor that it was clear she was getting thirsty for Seema even before she had joined the Bhajan Troupe.

"I think you should let me make the final selection; I don't need your advice." Anup quickly rebuked Jubilee. By this time, Bhajan Pal had called Seema: "Seema Bibi Anup sir has liked your audition and would like to meet you next Monday in the studio. He wants to get to know you before making the final decision." Pal informed Seema, who had been tense and patiently waiting for the call, over the phone. "Thank you, Pal sir. I am very grateful. I will be there on time to meet with Anup, sir. It will be an honor to meet with him." Seema replied politely.

Seema did not tell her parents about the call from Bhajan Pal; she wanted to keep things under wraps until she had made contact with the Bhajan Trip; she wanted to be sure she had made the selection. She was still tense but managed to hop into an auto and venture toward Model Town to meet with the legendary Anup Jalota.

"Seema ji, please wait in the hall. Sir will be with you in a few minutes. I have told him good things about you, so don't get tense. You are almost through. I can promise you that." Bhajan made Seema feel at ease. In a while, the tall, gigantic figure of Anup Jalota approved her in the hall. "Oh! Great, I was waiting to meet with you. You have a very melodious voice. I am so happy we have such talented singers in Ludhiana." Anup arrived in the hall and greeted Seema Dusaj with a polite handshake.

"No, tell me, where did you learn music and singing?" Anup asked Seema. "I am a fine arts student and have been keen to learn music since my teen years. I am mostly self-taught, but I took some college music classes. But I learned the art of singing by listening to other great singers. I am mostly self-taught, sir." Seema replied with all honesty.

"Good, that means you have a natural gift. I am so glad we don't get such talented singers every day. I also admire how you move and shake your leg while singing; it is beautiful." Anup gave Seema a Pep talk.

"Will you be comfortable traveling abroad with our Bhajan trip? We mainly travel to the US and the Middle East, and there is a lot of Indian diaspora in these places. Also, will it be OK with your family to see you travel and be on the road for long periods?" Anup asked Seema.

"Sir, does that mean I have been selected?" Seema asked Anup, sir,

"Yes! We want you to join us. I was very impressed with your singing, but we will have to fine-tune you, and then you can sing with us at local concerts in Ludhiana. When you are polished, we will also take you abroad." Anup informed her.

"Sir, I have not told my family; they are not keen and happy for me to take up a singing career; they want me to work in an office as a secretary. So I did not tell them about the audition until everything was finalized." Seema replied.

"Oh! That is OK. Pal Ji will give you your contact information. You will be paid five thousand rupees as a monthly stipend as food will be served; you will have to manage the rest yourself. Bhajan Pal ji, please give the lady her contact information. I have already given it." Anup gave his instructions to Bhajan Pal.

"I am so happy you selected me and liked my singing. Anup sir. I will inform my family about it now. I am also a good dancer. I have a diploma in dance from Punjab University, and I can perform very well in stage shows. I have a lot of medals and certificates for my dancing ability. As well." Seema informed Anup Jalota.

"That is wonderful. You are a good artist. I assure you you will shine with our Bhajan Singing Gang. I will personally groom you, my dear." Anup then patted her on the head and pulled her cheeks rather cheekily. He clearly had an eye on Simran and found her very attractive.

Seema was in ninth heaven; she had been selected to be part of a Bhajan singing troupe. It was beautiful; this would be a new turn in her life. She would travel the world, perform in different cities, and lead a more glamorous life. This was her ticket out of the struggle of a middle-class life she shared with her parents in Ludhiana. Now, she had to break the news to her parents, who would not be too pleased with her.

"Mummy, I have to tell you something. I just gave an audition for a Bhajan singing troupe. It is very famous, run by the great singer Anup Jalota of all people, and I have been elected. They have also given me a contract for the same." Seema broke the news to her mother. "What! Papa had told you to concentrate on your studies. We spent money to get you new glasses, and you went and gave an audition for sinning Bhajan. Beta sinning and dancing will not be able to feed you, and you will have to travel all over the country. The family needs you. We need you as our financial and emotional support." Dimple told Seema, showing her disapproval.

"But mummy, this is my break; it can change my life. I will keep sending you money and will always be in touch. Look at the contract; they are paying me a stipend. I will be able to fend for myself. Can't you see this is a great break? Please support me on this." Seema cribbed and begged her mother to see better sense without dissuading or challenging her decision. She spoke to her professor's father in the evening and informed him about joining the Bhajan troupe. Sukh Dev Dusaj was initially reluctant, but then he finally agreed and gave in to her daughter's wishes and her tantrums. Seema was happy that she had rebelled and convinced her folks that she wanted to plunge full-time into singing and dancing. As a fine arts student, she knew that this was the line she wanted to pursue.

"Pal ji, when will the rehearsals start? Please do inform me. I want to give it my best and impress sir." Seema spoke on the phone to Bhajan Pal; she was now ready to go. Soon, the rehearsals and training for the Bhajan trip started; fifteen ladies and five men were in a stupor. Anup Jalota conducted the classes, and his muse and mistress, **Jubilee Kumari, assisted him.**

"See, Bhajan singing is an art; it needs a pure heart and soul. Before you start training, please recite the Gayatri mantra; it will purify you and cleanse your soul." Anup gave his instructions, and dutifully, everyone sang the Gayatri Mantra. The training sessions would go on for two to three hours in the evening at the Model Town building. Ultimately, everyone was served lime juice with honey and bread pakodas, as was the custom. "See, it will take two months; that is how long we will rehearse. Every day, we will have ten bhajans and two dance performances; that is the format. I will sing two Bhajans, and the rest will be assigned Bhajans to sing." Anup explained the show format to all. "Jubilee, you will assign the bhajans to everyone; make sure you add Yashoda Ka Nand Lala, too; it is a Bhajan that many people enjoy listening to." Anup gave further instructions to his assistant. Bhajan Lal was asked to prepare the snacks and ensure they were served on time. He also had the task of doing train, plane, and taxi bookings for the group and getting accommodation for everyone. He was also looking after the budget, but the decor of the stall and arranging the dais were left to Jubilee Kumari. The troupe functioned well, and everyone knew their respective tasks. "Discipline and process—we all need to follow that; this is the only mantra to success." Anup would always lecture his Bhajan singers.

"Sir, what is your most popular bhajan?" Seema sent her mentor. "Oh! That was Rang de Chunaria, which is very popular. Also, my Bhajans on Krishna sell the most number of cassettes." Anup replied with a large, pleasing smile on his face. He would spend hours with his singers, teaching them the nuances of sound recording and how to sing into the microphone. He would also do voice training and teach them how to do Riaz. In that way, he was dedicated to his art and making his singers world-class. He wanted them to improve and get better, so he gave it his all during the Bhajan training sessions.

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It was time for Seema to show her skills and talent in front of a live audience. Rehearsals are one thing, but performing live is another. One needs total concentration and will; there is no room for mistakes while performing live. She felt that the stage was set for her, and if she did a good job, she would win the hearts of her audience and, her well-wishers and her mentor and teacher, Anup Jalota himself.

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Seema and how she performed. Most of all, Anup Jalota was over the moon. "My dear Seema, you were a super hit, and this is only the beginning for you; you are now ready to take on the world." Anup congratulated Seema and hugged her like she was his own extraordinary thing. "I am happy you are pleased; more than anyone else, it is you whose approval I seek. I want to see you pleased with my performance."

Seema replied with gratitude, staring into her master's eyes. "I am sure Anup, sir, would like to see you perform." Jubilee Kumar intervened slyly. "What do you mean?" Seema asked her. "You know better how to please Anup, sir; don't be so naive." Jubilee gave her more hints. "Oh! Come on, the two of you are always at each other's throats. Let's have a great dinner and drinks today to celebrate the success of this Bhajan show. Come, come, let's have a little party." Anup decimated the tension between the two ladies and diverted the topic. But it was clear that Jubilee Kumari was feeling threatened by Seema's success and the way she was hogging all the attention of Anup sir, who before had only eyes for her.

The late-night dinner of chicken curry and tikka, along with single malt whisky, went very well. Anup was a heavy drinker and had been known to polish off half a bottle before his concerts. It was strange for a bhajan singer to drink so much whisky. But after his drinks, what he wanted most was a woman in his bed. He had many to choose from from his Bhajan troupe and Jubilee Kumari, and he warmed his bed for quite some time. It was well known amongst his troupe, But today, he wanted Seema; he wanted to taste her breasts, feel her skin, smell her naked body, and penetrate her; he wanted to have sex with her. He thought that after seeing her singing talent, he had to have her in bed and check her out in all her naked flesh. It was clear from how he looked at her that he wanted her badly. Seema, too, had become aware of that, and the taunts from Jubilee Kumari reinforced that fact. Seema knew she had found her first ladder to success and fame and would use Anup Jalota to fulfill her dreams. But for that, she would have to sleep with him and satisfy his sexual desires.

That was her first night with Anup, as on the way back to the studio, he pulled her upstairs into her private bedroom, which bore testimony to his many conquests. Seema was reluctant at first. Dressed in a yellow silk sari and matching blouse, she was pulled by an inebriated Anup as if against her wishes, but she knew she had to please her mentor. After all, he would be her ticket to freedom, fame, and sublation, which she wanted more than anything. Seema just closed her eyes and let herself go. She had no control over herself. As Anup closed the door, she started to violently feel her taut breasts, kissing her neck and kissing her with vigor like a hungry vulture. He punched her and hugged her till she could breathe no more. Then he lifted her in his arms and threw her on the large bump bed covered with heavy blue sheets. He fell on her. He was heavy, but Seema somehow managed to carry her weight. He kissed her and then slowly moved his hands under her saree and petticoat till he would feel her warm jelly-like pussy, and then with one thrust, he inserted two fingers of his up her tantalizing and wet vagina, gently stroking it and moving it up and down in a rhythmic fashion as if playing and teasing her. Seema, who had closed her eyes, could feel his breath full of liquor flush on her face. It was not a very pleasing smell, but she knew she had to go on and not fight Anup; she had to give in to his sexual needs. After all, he was the boss.

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her eyes and looked at him. He was much older than her but broad and tall. She looked at him from head to toe and then closed her eyes again. Seema did not care that he looked like a beast; she was warm and light-headed. She just wanted to be fucked by him and get it over with once and for all.

As she closed her eyes and lay on the bed on her back, he moved closer to her and leaned towards her face, then fell on her like a sack of hay till every pore of his naked body and skin touched Seema's flesh. He lifted her legs apart slowly and gently, trying his best to position himself so that he could now penetrate her and give her some sweet pain. In a flash, he then entreated her with his stiff, rigid, six-inch penis, which had become erect with all the foreplay. Now all it took was one violent thrust, and he was inside her plump pussy. Seema screwed with joy and pain alike. She displayed and caught the pillow with both her hands. She violently bit her lips as Anup thrust her and penetrated her, one thrust at a time. Soon they were violently fucking each other with sheer joy. "Yes, sir, I am yours. I am all yours. Could you show me the heavens? Anup, sir, take me like you have taken no other." Seema begged Anup to go harder. She knew he was much older than her, but she did not want her to stop; she wanted his hard cock inside her for as long as he could hold her. She did not want him to come; she just wanted her to go on endlessly. She wanted sex so bad, and now she was fully aroused.

Harder, harder, faster, hurt me. I want all of you inside me. Just fuck me. Just fuck me" Seema was over the moon; she was in the seventh heaven. She felt so much pleasure. She wanted the best to ravage her and shame her, to give her pleasure in all of it. Anup went full throttle; he was heavy and would tire quickly, but he took her more than four times that night until they were both exhausted and sweaty. He had enjoyed her all night, and many times, he came right inside her.

"Are you on the pill? I am sorry; I should have used a condom." Anup said after he had had sex with her: "No sir, but I will buy it on the way back home. I don't want

to get pregnant and have many amazing things to achieve in life." Seema explained as she gently placed her head on Anup's chest, playing with his hair and gently teasing his nipples.

"Oh! It was heavy, but it was great that you are so young, agile, and soft. I want you more, Seema. I want you more." Saying that, he kissed her again and again, and just before she left, he had a quick session with her again.

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As she closed her eyes and lay on the bed on her back, he moved closer to her and leaned towards her face, then fell on her like a sack of hay till every pore of his naked body and skin touched Seema's flesh. He lifted her legs apart slowly and gently, trying his best to position himself so that he could now penetrate her and give her some sweet pain. In a flash, he then entreated her with his stiff, rigid, six-inch penis, which had become erect with all the foreplay. Now all it took was one violent thrust, and he was inside her plump pussy. Seema screwed with joy and pain alike. She displayed and caught the pillow with both her hands. She violently bit her lips as Anup thrust her and penetrated her, one thrust at a time. Soon they were violently fucking each other with sheer joy. "Yes, sir, I am yours. I am all yours. Could you show me the heavens? Anup, sir, take me like you have taken no other." Seema begged Anup to go harder. She knew he was much older than her, but she did not want her to stop; she wanted his hard cock inside her for as long as he could hold her. She did not want him to come; she just wanted her to go on endlessly. She wanted sex so bad, and now she was fully aroused.

Harder, harder, faster, hurt me. I want all of you inside me. Just fuck me. Just fuck me" Seema was over the moon; she was in the seventh heaven. She felt so much pleasure. She wanted the best to ravage her and shame her, to give her pleasure in all of it. Anup went full throttle; he was heavy and would tire quickly, but he took her more than four times that night until they were both exhausted and sweaty. He had enjoyed her all night, and many times, he came right inside her.

"Are you on the pill? I am sorry; I should have used a condom." Anup said after he had had sex with her: "No sir, but I will buy it on the way back home. I don't want to get pregnant and have many amazing things to achieve in life." Seema explained as she gently placed her head on Anup's chest, playing with his hair and gently teasing his nipples.

"Oh! It was heavy, but it is great that you are so young, agile, and soft. I want you more, Seema. I want you more." Saying that, he kissed her again and again, and just before she left, he had a quick session with her again.

Chapter Three: Phir Vijay Palande Ne Meri Li

The success of her first concert had given Seema a lot of confidence, and her elaborate sex session with her mentor had put her in his good books. She had sidelined Jubilee Kumari as Anup's pet. "I think it is time for you to give your Bhajan performances in the maximum city. If you can win people's hearts in Mumbai, you will get a record deal, and then the sky is the limit. We will have a show at the Andheri Sports Ground in three months. Please do your Riaz and get ready for it. This will elevate you and do wonders for your fledgling career." Anup had advised his young muse. "I know, Anup, but my family doesn't like my singing and dancing. I have no support from home." Seema lamented. "Don't worry, you have all my support, and I have confidence in you. I will prepare you for it and ensure you are a hit amongst the people." Anup reassured her.

At home, Seema's mother, Dimple, was nagging, "Look, if you want to sing Bhajans all your life, you must do it with your own money; you will not get our support. Instead of being a help to the family, you are turning out to be a burden. We are not Ambanis; we can't support your expensive hobbies, and going to Mumbai is not such a costly city. You must fend for yourself, even though your father is against your career choice." Dimple said it curtly and clarified that the family would not support her financially.

"It's OK, mummy. I will manage Anup, sir, and the troupe will help me. I don't need your approval, but I will not throw away my dreams like this. I have worked hard for them." Seema made it clear to her mother. She did not get much support from her father, Sukh Dev Dusaj, who remained unresponsive to his daughter's needs.

Soon, the time had come for Seema to take wings and get ready to fly. She knew she was on a journey she would have to handle alone. The Anup Jalota trip was booked on a train headed to VT station in Mumbai. The entire trope had over twenty-five people, including singers and musicians. This was going to be a big

concert, and more than twenty-five thousand people were expected to turn up for the event, even though the tickets had been sold in advance. This was a performance many Mumbaikars were waiting for, and giant banners were placed outside the stadium welcoming everyone.

The train to Mumbai finally left from the Ludhiana station, and Seema said goodbye to the city where she had grown up. She knew that she would not return soon and that life was taking her elsewhere. Somewhere where she could give wings to her dreams, a city that welcomes millions of people to attain what they want in life, but a city that is equally ruthless and unkind

"We have set up a grand stage for you, Seema; you will be performing the opening bhajan; it is Anup sir's wish." Bhajan Pal, the secretary, informed Seema. "We will be staying in the Day and Night Hotel in Andheri; it has comfortable rooms, rest, and transportation, all of which have been arranged by our sponsors." Bhajan Pal informed Seema.

The troupe was taken by chartered bus to the Hotel, and they had two days to rest before the concert began. That was time for them to relax and prepare themselves. "What Bhajan have you been assigned to sing this time, Seema?" Pal Sahib asked Seema. "Anup sir asked me to sing Jag mein sundar hai do naam; that will be my Bhajan at the concert." Seema promptly replied. As expected, the concert was a whole house, and people were eagerly waiting for the event to start. The crowd was restless, and soon the band came on stage, and the performance began. As expected, Seema was in full swing. She sang her heart out as if she were in total meditation, and her voice reverberated. Even the backbenchers were able to get a real taste of her voice. She sang and sang, and the woofers and speakers did their bit to make her voice accessible. It was a

breath-taking show, and people lapped it up enthusiastically. The concert continued until the night's wee hours, and Seema performed her favorite Bhajan twice. People couldn't get enough of her voice, and due to popular demand, she came on stage at the end to perform her Bhajan again.

"The city has been kind to you, Seema; the people have taken to your sin; you were a hit today, girl." Bhajan Pal congratulated Seema, who was a bit exhausted by now. "I just want to get to my room and chill. I am way too tired, and the air conditioners are not working. I was sweating like a pig." Seema replied. Seema rested all day the next day. She slept for hours. She was exhausted from the stage performance, and all she wanted to do was rest. In the evening, she decided to go for dinner. She felt like having fish curry and Mughlai food as she strolled on the road outside her Hotel. She saw a restaurant called Copper Chimney, a popular restaurant in the Andheri area, and she gingerly entered the Hotel to have her dinner. She was alone today and had ventured out alone, leaving the rest of her Bhajan Troupe back in the Hotel.

Seema sat at the table in the extreme left corner of the Copper Chimney restaurant and started reading from the menu. She had a meal to order. She quietly flipped through the menu, sipping lime water from her glass. Then she looked around at the crowd; it was a family restaurant, and many well-healed, rich people came. The parking lot outside the restaurant was full of fancy and expensive cars, including Ford, Bale-no, and even Ford. It was an upper-class restaurant, for sure. Dapperly dressed men and women wearing silk sarees and decadent gold jewelry. She was not used to eating in such a luxurious environment, not in Ludhiana. Seem felt she had finally arrived; she was in the city of her dreams, and her concert had gone well. This was the start of a new chapter in her life, and indeed it was. She was reminiscing when she suddenly looked up and saw a fair-built middle-aged man with thin black hair staring at her. "So what will madam like to have today? We are here at your service." Vijay

Palande, the stern steward of Copper Chimney restaurant, looked into Seema's eyes and asked her politely.

"Ah! And you are?" Seema asked. "Madam, I am Vijay, Vijay Palande. I am the head steward at the Copper Chimney and at your service. What would you like to eat? Our Bombay duck is famous, and you will love the prawn curry." Vijay asked her to order her meal. "Well, maybe you can order for me; you already seem to know what I would like to have," Seema replied.

"You are here on business or pleasure," Vijay asked Seema. "Well, I am an artist and am here for a concert at the nearby stadium," Seema replied. "Oh! For the Bhajan concert, I had seen the posters and banners of the concert all over Andheri. That's great, so you are a singer, or do you play an instrument?" Vijay asked Seema, wanting to know more about her. "No, no, I am a singer; we have come here as part of the Anup Jalota troupe; I am from Punjab; you know Ludhiana," Seema informed Vijay, who was of a wettish complexion and was listening to her intently. "Great, so it is your first time in Mumbai. This is a glamorous city; it has its pull." Vijay informed Seema.

"Yes, I, too, have dreams, and I feel this city has a strange pull, but as of now, I am hungry. Can you get me a prawn curry with rice? I want some white wine as well." Seema sent Vijay to serve her. "I am at your service, madam, and I am sure you will enjoy what our chef can cook up," Vijay told Seema, took her order, and then left towards the kitchen to tell the chef what he should cook for Seema.

"So, what did you say your name was?" Vijay asked Seema as he put two hot plates on her table. "Seema, I am Seema Susan Bhajan, a singer from Ludhiana. That is me for sure." Seema replied promptly.

"You will love the prawns, and we also serve some fabulous caramel custard; it's my favorite. You will love it." Vijay made his suggestions. "Yes, that would be great. I would love some caramel custard." Seema was keen to taste the food at this famous restaurant.

"Where are you put up in the city?" Vijay probed further, and it was clear that he was attracted to Steam's slim and slender frame, cat eyes, and fair complexion. "We are staying at the Day and Night hotel. I am with you for the entire trip, but we will leave for Punjab in a few days.' Seema informed Vijay Palande. "Oh! That's a shame. Would you not like to stay back? For an artist like you, Mumbai is the city to be in." Vijay told Seema.

"I know I also want to stay back, but I am new to the city, and if I need to try and get more work or try my luck in modeling and acting, I will have to stay back and struggle. My parents are not too keen on my Mumbai escapades, but I love the city and want to make a mark here." Seema was now slowly opening up to Vijay; they had been talking for over an hour as Seema ate her morsel by morsel.

"Hmm, interesting. I know this area like the back of my hand. I can get you paying guest accommodation in Andheri; it will be inexpensive. You can stay back and struggle in the city; you must give it time, but I am sure a talented woman like you will find work. I can help you with that. I know a lot of Bollywood directors and actors who visit this restaurant all day. I can get you introduced to them." Vijay Palande then extended his hand of friendship to Seema.

That night, Seema slept well. She had found a new friend in Vijay Palande, the strewed copper chimney. She needed a foothold in the city and was sure Vijay

would help her. Seema informed Pal Ji two days later that she would not return to Ludhiana with the rest of the troupe. "I have informed my parents that I am staying back in the city," Seema told Pal Sahib. "I will look for work here, maybe acting and modeling assignments, but I am not leaving the Bhajan Group. I will perform when you have concerts in the city. I feel this is my big chance, and I must grab it with both hands. I will call Anup sir and inform him of the same." Seema explained this to Bhajan Pal.

It had become clear to her that she wanted to be in the city of dreams and that she would find her salvation in Mumbai. With Vijay's help, she found a place to stay; it was a duplex house owned by an old Parsi lady, and she did not have to pay much rent. That was going to be her home in Mumbai for some time.

"Don't worry, I will help you with the contacts, but first, you need to manage if you want to reach some scratches or demo audio. I have a few friends who own recording studios; they will help you. But first, you need to build your portfolio; once that is done, you need to meet casting directors; they will help you with auditions and help you get roles or modeling assignments." Vijay was now Seema's guide in the city.

Seema was taken in by Vijay's help and concern for her well-being. She had started relating to the man; he looked sincere and spoke pleasedly to her. Soon, Seema began to struggle and got a portfolio made. She was told she was a bit skinny, which might be a hindrance; she did not know anything about dialogue delivery or how to look into the camera. "Well, if you are a singer, try to get singing jobs and assignments." A casting director told her, 'I want to act as well; I want to see myself on the silver screen. I will sing to make ends meet, but I feel there is an actress trapped within me.' Seema would tell the casting people.

Soon, she would line up for auditions in the Lokhandwala and Bandra areas. But as she could have been better as an actor, she came across as someone who was very stiff in front of the camera, and her Hindi accent could have been better. She also needed help learning her lines. Nine months had passed, and she had not had any success. In the evening, she would meet Vijay, and he would take her for a stroll to Juhu Beach for a kulfi or chaat. She would speak to him for hours about her day and her problems during her auditions. "You should get some simple modeling work; maybe ramp shows will help shed your inhibitions." Vijay would advise her on her professional matters. He had become her guide in the city, and like Anup, now Vijay Palande was her subsequent mentor, friend, and philosopher. The two would meet often, even on weak days, and Vijay introduced her to some of his friends, including serial directors and even a few music directors in the industry. "You should not get so discouraged; this is not an easy line; people struggle to make it for years in this industry. Be patient." Vijay would console her and also help out with her rent when she did not have money from time to time. Seema has now become dependent on Vijay Palande and sees him as lovely. The two got close to each other.

Here, Seema met a close confidant and friend of Vijay Palande called Dhananjay Shinde. He worked as a dishwasher and cleaner at the Copper Chimney under Vijay Palande. "This is Danny; he works with me at the restaurant. He is an accommodating and trustworthy guy." Vijay said as Seema looked at Dhananjay in blue denim jeans and a crumpled white shirt. "Namaste madam, I am Dhananjay Shinde. I live in Dharavi. Vijay sir is my boss. He is a very good man." Dhananjay Shinde greeted Seema Dusaj. This was the first time she met the man who would play a pivotal role in many of Vijay's murderous plans, but she was still unaware of Vijay's true intentions.

Vijay Palande had taken a liking to Seema; that much was clear to her, but what did he want from her for doing so much for her? "Seema, I work as a steward at Copper Chimney, but I also have a past that you need to know. I have worked for the underworld under Don Santosh Shetty, and I was lodged in Kolhapur Jail in a drug trafficking case. This restaurant is not meant for me. I wish to open my restaurant in Milan and Spain one day, but I will need a lot of money. I want to be an underworld don and make money that way so I can one day start my own restaurant. I need your help in this journey of mine." Vijay told Seema that he knew it was time for him to let her know his true intentions.

"I want you to be my partner in life and help me become the most feared underworld don in Mumbai. I want you to help build my dream of opening a great hotel that will be the envy of the world." Vijay told Seema, who was still taken back after hearing about his real identity.

"So you have been to jail as well?" Seema asked him. Yes, I was there for a few months and spent time in Kolhapur jail, but I finally got bail, and I am a free man. Dhananjay also works for me; his job at Copper Chimney as a cleaner and dishwasher is just a front. This is our day job, and you know day jobs pay very well." Vijay told Seema with a straight face.

"I, too, have a dream: to be famous and be known as a famous actor and a celebrity in Mumbai. Will you help me with my dream?" Seema told Vijay Palande

"Well, I am already helping you with that dream, and I know soon you will start getting acting jobs." Vijay looked deep into her eyes; he could see that she was not shocked to hear about his criminal past and activities.

"Well, they live in Ludhiana; my father is a professor, and my mother is a teacher. I have one brother and a younger sister as well. We can meet with them when we get married. I don't talk to them much; they are against me and my dreams." Seema replied.

"We can have a court marriage in a quiet ceremony and call a few friends for dinner at Copper Chimney; then I will take you to meet with my family in Chiplun." Vijay Palande remarked.

"Do you know my father was a veteran of World War Two? He even took a bullet in his arm and chest while fighting, and like my father, his brother was also a war veteran, but my brother chose to be a teacher. My father was also the sarpanch of the village in his older days. We are a very prominent family in Chiplun; in fact,

there are scores of Palande near and around our village. It is the favorite surname of the region." Vijay gave Seema further information about his family. "But I moved away from them and got a diploma in hotel management from an institute in Dadar. I have been working in Copper Chimney for the past few years. Before that, I was a steward at Garden Court in Andheri. I dream of making a huge restaurant, maybe someplace abroad." Vijay told Seema

Vijay Palande thus married Seema outside the Andheri Court in 1998 after two years of courtship. It was settled; they had decided to tie the knot, and now their destinies were intertwined.

Vijay took Seema to his sister-in-law's place; they were cold towards her. They saw a change in Vijay's behavior; he had become uptight and pensive. But Seema did exchange pleasantries with them and put up a strong front. She knew that, as of now, it was Vijay who would see her through the dilemmas of the city. Vijay would help her with money, pay her rent, buy her clothes, and generally look after her well. Seema knew that Vijay had connections with the underworld so that he could make money on the side. His day job did not pay him much, and he always complained that if he had to become big and achieve his dreams of becoming a wealthy man, it was the underworld he had to turn to. He would smuggle Durgs, such as cocaine and other amphetamines, for his boss Santosh Shetty and would occasionally be jailed, but the big boss would bail him out and pay up the cops as well. "Crime is big business in Mumbai; it has always been and always will be." Vijay had told Seema, who was convinced that what he was doing was right. She needed and loved him, so she could not go against his wishes. Seema knew that she had almost served her relationship with her family in Punjab, so now only Vijay could take her forward in life.

"Hey, there is a rap group audition in Juhu. This rap artist, Devan Patel, is doing a rap film called Smile Please. You need to audition for it if you are good at sinning." Vijay asked her to record audio for the film Smile Please, in which Simran got a small role as a model and dancer. She was young then and slim as well. She got this role from her beginner's luck, and she took it with both hands.

"Congratulations, Seema, on your first role in Mumbai," Vijay said, and then they both went to Juhu Beach for Chat and Pakoda's; that was how they celebrated. Seema looked like a peach today, and Vijay decided to have her all night. They were both in a good mood due to Seema's small success in getting her first role. Vijay went up to her room, where she was staying as a paying guest, and then pounced on her like a Hungry vulture. She was now his wife, his woman; he could finally have his way with her, precisely what he did. After all, he was footing her expenses and paying her bills; he deserved to have her. He tore Seema's blouse and removed her bra, and then he just went ballistic. His naked body rammed into her; he trusted his penis inside her and had her again and again like a hungry vulture. He did it repeatedly, and Seema reciprocated; she knew that all she had was her body to give to him and that she did. He took her from behind and tickled her taut breasts. He wanted his fill; he had paid for her and had been her only guide in the city. He was her man. The sex session lasted for hours, and then Vijay abruptly left her in her bed. "I have to go, my boss Santosh. He called up some builders, creating trouble; he needed me to sort it out. I love you, Seema, and I need you to be with me in my dream. One day, I will rule this city and be its ultimate don, but I cannot do it without your help and support. Will you be there for me?" Vijay asked Seema. "Han1, of course, darling, but you have to look after my financial needs; you know, no money, no honey." Seema laughed as she steadied herself and gently slipped out of bed. She picked up her pants and then wore them back again.

"So now we are a team, and together we can take on anybody in the world, but we must stick together and keep each other's secrets." Vijay reaffirmed it to her.

Seema, meanwhile, stayed back in her room to think over her next move. She knew that now, with Vijay Palande's support, she would have no problem living in Mumbai. She did not need the support of her family anymore; she was independent and could fend for herself. But what she yearned for was fame, which was still not in her grasp. All she had to show for her acting efforts was a small role in a low-budget film called Smile Please. There was a long way to go for

her, but at least her new journey in the city of dreams had begun, and with Vijay Palande by her side, she was confident that she would survive in the city, at least for now. Mumbai is a difficult place to get one's accommodation, and although Seema was staying as a paying guest, she yearned for a flat of her own, as did Vijay Palande. However, they needed more money to buy their property, and Vijay did not earn that much from his work with the underworld. At this stage, Vijay Palande had a chance meeting with Swaraj Ranjan Das, a resident of Juhu.

"I want to marry you and make you part of my life, Seema." Vijay popped the question.

"Yes! I will marry you, but you must introduce me to your family." Seema told him

"Well, I have my sister and brother-in-law **Sulekha Shinde** and **Ganpat Rao Shinde**, who live in Shirgaon Village, Chiplun, near Ratnagiri. I will take you to meet them, but first, we must get married. By the way, what about your family? Vijay asked Seema.

Chapter Four: Ab Anup Das Meri Lega

Swaraj Ranjan Das was in his mid-fifties, a large, burly man with a wettish complexion. He frequented the Copper Chimney restaurant often, and it was here that he met Vijay Palande, who, being a smooth talker, served him well. Vijay knew the hospitality business, and the key to the company was managing his customers. He would serve the best-chilled beer and wine to Swaraj Ranjan Das, who would occasionally tip him handsomely. No matter when Swaraj arrived for his dinner with his family and friends, he got the best table with the air conditioning by his side. Vijay ensured special hot plates were put on the table and that food was served piping hot. He would make Swaraj's favorite Bombay Duck with the right masala. He would order Kulfi falooda for his client and engage him in long conversations about the Mumbai stock market and the health of the hospitality industry.

Swaraj introduced Vijay Palande to his son Anup Das and his wife Usha Das when the family celebrated Anup's birthday. Vijay Palande organized the cake and sweets for the birthday parties. Slowly, he got close to the family over time and got to know them better. He understood that the family had two flats in the city and that Anup was also looking after the pension fund of retired Air India employees; in fact, he was also working on two building projects that Air India commissioned to build flats for their employees. Vijay Palande got a sniff of the Das family's wealth and realized they could be a ticket to his dream of owning a flat in the city where he could live comfortably with Seema.

"Look, Seema, I think I have a solution to our home issue. I have a rich customer who frequently visits Copper Chimney. I have sized him up and also managed to win his trust. I will soon propose some business venture with him; the family has two flats in the city; now all I need is to grab one of the flats that should be perfect, don't you think?" Vijay informed Seema about his plans to grab the flats of the Das Family.

Soon, Vijay introduced Seema to Anup Das and his father. The plan was simple. Seema would use her charm to get the family's financial details and cozy up to the son, Anup Das. Vijay had developed a simple plan to use Seema as a honey trap in all his plans. He was a gangster, after all, and gangsters just take what they want from others.

Anup Das would often discuss his business plans with Vijay. "Hotel business is tricky, Vijay. A lot of Capital investment is required at first, and the reruns are very slow. One needs differentiation and good food, but look at the competition; it's humungous." Anup often said this as they discussed their plans over drinks and dinner at the Copper Chimney restaurants. Vijay would usually arrange birthday parties for the family and take them to the hills of Khandala. The Das family slowly started trusting him, and that's what he wanted. Vijay even applied for a Flat in the building Anup Das was making for the entire Air India union. He was the Air India leader and the trusty of the company's pension fund, which meant that he alone was authorized to sign the checks for the construction work of the building. Vijay Palande had paid an advance of Rs 20 lakh to book his flat in the upcoming structure. He wanted a cheap price, and Anup promised him he would get the best price.

"Vijay, the family is loaded; they have two flats, one in Juhu. Anup also has a sister and brother; the sister is married and lives in Calcutta. They also have lots of money in their father's PPF fund. "Seema gave Vijay the lowdown on the assets of the Das Family. "You need to learn more about the bank details, the FD numbers, and the property paper details. Listen, I want you to get close to Anup Das. Why don't you sleep with him? That is the best way to establish trust. Have sex with the man as it is. He keeps eyeing you during the dinner parties. I can see that he wants you. It's so obvious." Vijay told Seema.

"Yeah, but he is too dark and has a belly; I don't think he will even be able to do it." Seem laughed. "Try the car, darling; these people are the perfect bakes for us. Just get all the bank numbers and check the details. I will take care of the father and son. Once the suitable moment strikes, I will chop them both up in too little pieces, like meat in the meat grinder, and we can take over their last, maybe both of them." Vijay and his devious criminal mind were fully alert, and he had been slowly dreaming up his master plan to dupe the Das family of their wealth and assets. But he knew he needed Seema as the honey trap to get all the vital details. It was Sunday night, and as usual, Anup Das had come over for dinner at the copper chimney, but this time, he found Seema at the eatery; she was also waiting for a table. "Hi! Anup, can I join you, dear? There is so much rush today." Saying this, she slowly moved towards Das's table and planted herself beside her. "Great night, no, it's buzzing. It seems the entire restaurant has come over for dinner today. Some, let's order a few drinks. I will have vodka with spirit, and what will be your poison?" Seem asked Das. "I like single malt, darling, with soda, and order some papad and chicken tikka as we'll need that with liquor." Anup Das then called the waiter and instructed him as Seema sat beside him, smoking a Benson and Hedges. "Life, Anup, is very hectic. I have been doing the rounds of auditions and meeting directors, but many people are gunning for acting jobs. More than a thousand people land in this city daily to become actors. The place is full of wannabes and strugglers, most from UP and Bihar. They have no dressing sense, and they stink of sweat." Seema complained and shared her professional troubles with Anup Das. "Well, it is not going to be easy; life in the city is difficult, and there are just too many people in your field looking for limited jobs." Anup gave his two-bit. "What about you? What are you up to these days? Vijay told me you are busy making a multi-story residential complex for your old employees in Air India." Yes! That is true; the project is enormous, more than fifty crores. Real estate is expensive and in short supply in the city." Anup replied.

"What about your flats? They seem very posh, though." Seema quizzed him, trying to ascertain the value of both properties in Anup and Swaraj Ranjan Das's flats. "Well, the flat in which Dad stays at Magic Carpet is around two crores;

that's the one in Juhu, and my flat in D.N. Nagar should fetch around two and a half crores because it has a larger carpet area," Anup replied that he was slowly getting tipsy as Seema kept pouring him one peg after another. She was plying him with single malt and moving even closer to him. She was slowly feeding him bits of chicken tikka and bits and pieces of Papad. She wanted to get him high so that he would loosen his tongue and his guard would fall off.

"Tell me more: when do you expect your building project to end?" Seema sent Anup Das, who was now on his fifth drink. He was slowly going tipsy and lightheaded. "Oh! That will take a few more years to complete; even Vijay has booked a flat in my building project." Anup Das told Seema

"Hey, Anup, if you want to try this, maybe you can just powder your nose." Seema took out her powder case from her handbag and clipped a pouch of cocaine into his palms. "What the fuck that's cocaine, Seema? Sh*t, shit, when did you start doing cocaine?" Anup asked her, and he was a bit taken aback as Seema thrust the pouch into his hand. "Nothing darling, just to get loose, sort a few lines, and you will be rocking. Don't worry; everyone is doing it in Mumbai. Cocaine is the king of drugs. Just have a few lines in the bathroom. Open the pouch on the commode slab. Take my credit card to make lines here, and then snort it with a hunter rupee note. Jannat hai darling, you will beg for more within an hour." Seema smiled and handed Anup Das her Axis Bank credit card to cut the line. Anup had already loosed up with a while, and now he was feeling fearless, so he took the cocaine and headed straight for the loo. He went into the loo; it was empty, and then, in haste, he opened the pouch, pouring the white salt on the commode slab. Slowly and clumsily, he cut the lines, four lines in all, in all the fat lines of the white powder, and with a quick sniff, he took it one line at a time till he was high; the cocaine had hit within minutes. But he had the urge to take some more, and so he did, snorting it again, one after another, till more than half the touch was over. He then steadied himself, washed his face, wiped his hands, and combed his hair before gingerly walking out of the men's restroom.

"Great, you seem to have had a splendid hit, and your eyes have winded up; it seems the effect of the coke is getting to you." Seema noticed that Anup was now high. He had even begun to slur, laughing at her bad jokes. This was the right time to strike. Seema felt that this was the right time to get out his bank details, account numbers, and property documents. After all, that was what Vijay had asked her to do; she was a honey trap, and Anup Das would be her first kill in the city of dreams. Anup, let's fish dinner. We can pick a bottle from the restaurant and move to your flat. I have another couple of grams of the hard stuff; we can polish it off at your place." Seema made her move and suggested to Anup, who was by now totally under her spell, that after whisky and cocaine, men get very horny, and Seema knew that very well. She would see lust and sex in Anup's eyes. Chal, let's go; the restaurant is about to close as it is. Let's go to your place. We still have a long night ahead of us.' Seema pulled Anup by the hand, and he struggled to pay off the bill and tip the waiter. Vijay Palande witnessed the entire drama from the pantry window of the copper chimney. He did not come out once to greet Seema or Das; he remained in the shadow, just keeping a close eye on them. It was his game, and he was the trickster. Like a wise man, he stayed behind the curtain like a true puppet master.

Soon, Seema and Anup were in Anup Das's D.N. Nagar flat, and Anup Das opened the door with his keys as he fumbled with the lock. "Now, you just lie down on the bed, Dera. Let me make a few more lines of coke for you. Snort them to your heart's content, dear." Seema took a CD case from Anup's room and made a few more lines of coke as both of them snorted it line by line. "Great, I feel like fresh air has gone inside me. Come, Anup, enjoy today. It is your night, my darling; let's get high." Seema made sure that Anup got blown out. She wanted him blown out because that's how she would gain control over him. "Now for my final act."

Seema stood up and took off her skirt, slowly pulling it off. After that, she unlocked her bra and took off her pants. "I am all yours tonight, can't you see? Do what you want with me." Seema slowly slipped beside Anup into his sheets. "Come have me, Daddy; I am all yours. Do what you want with me." Seema kissed him and kissed Anup, who just went with the flow. Soon they were both naked as Anup sucked her breasts and licked her nipples. "Try the cocaine; it's much more fun that way," Seema suggested, and Anup moved to the CD case. He rubbed some coke on his fingers and then rubbed it on Seema's breasts, and she strutted to like it off her naked body. Seema starched herself and lay on her back. Anup poured white powder on her stomach and sniffed it off her milky white body. "Seema blow me, darling, suck my cock, just blow me." Anup was now for it; the coke made his dick erect and complex, and soon Seema obliged him. She took some coke on the tips of her fingers and applied it gently to the tips and edges of her erect penis. She moved close to him and then went down on him, sucking his coke bit by bit at times, licking the tip with her tongue. The cosine mixed with her saliva was tantalizing, and then she sucked his coke bit by bit, sometimes slow, sometimes hard. She took his six-inch dick right back to her throat, Seema, and improved her skills in bed for sure. With her past lovers, she had gained a lot of experience.

"I want to fuck you from behind, Seema. Let me fuck your ass." Anup was now desperate and brutal, but the coke was not making him ejaculate. "I want to come inside you. Turn around, Seema. I want to fuck your ass hard." Anup begged her for doggy style. Seema was in the mood. Now high on cocaine, she was ready to give in to Anup's carnal desire and generously turned her butt to him. Anup rammed into her. He had a bit of a belly, but still, he managed to do her again and again till they both fell on the bed exhausted.

Anup played with her breasts for hours and then went down on Seema. She loved to lick, and her body was filled with a strange erotic spasm. Steam was totally in a state of letting go, and she just wanted it more. Anup's rock-hard penis penetrated her vagina and teased her vulva, sharp shocks of ecstasy and orgasm

would run up and down her spine. Seema loved getting fucked, and she showed it too. Anup poured liquor from the bottle on her and licked her stomach and back, making the liquor run down her skin as he licked it again and again with his tongue. He wanted to have her all; he was high, and he wanted her again and again. The whole night the two fucked each other like bunnies till Anup Das finally fell asleep. He was the senior partner and heavy of girth, so naturally, he tired early. Seema, on the other hand, could go on for much longer and beg him for more sex. But Anup Das was tired and slowly dozed off into a deep sleep. That was it. This was the moment Seema ate for, with Anup in a deep slumber. She got down to her actual work, for which Vijay had planted her, to get all the financial details of Anup Das and his entire clan.

Bank account numbers, locker details, photographs of the family's property documents, checkbook numbers, and credit card details. Seema got down to her real job. She knew Anup would not get up even if hit by a moving train right now, and this was her time to snoop around. Seema went about quietly doing her job. She picked up her bag and took out a portable cannon digital camera that Vijay had given her just for this espionage type of task, and Seema started to search the drawers in Anup's house, including his rooms and drawing room. The cupboards were open, and she reviewed some files on the table. One by one, she meticulously took photographs of Anup's property papers and his checkbooks. She found some credit cards and a locker key with the number written on it. She kept clicking pictures with her camera until she had enough bank details for the entire family. Then she slipped the camera back into her handbag and quietly slipped herself back into the sheets beside Anup, who was snoring like hell by now; he was in a deep sleep and oblivious to Seema's true intentions. Seema had recorded all the information on her camera, and now she had done her task. She got up early in the morning and made some tea before finally slipping out of Anup's flat.

Outside, she took a taxi and returned to her PG accommodation. In the evening, she called Vijay to inform him that her task was done. "I fooled that gorilla. Anup was asleep, and I got all his financial details—lots of money in those bank accounts. Bada mega phasaya Hai is bar. The family is loaded. I got the power of attorney papers as well. All the snaps are in the digital camera you gave me." Seema informed Vijay Palande. "Great job, darling. Now that you know the real meaning of a honey trap, you are my honey bunny, Seema. Now leave everything to me; we will have a huge flat in D N Nagar when I am through with both father and son." Vijay said on the phone that he had a dastardly plan cooking in his mind, which he should have informed Seema about, at least not at this point.

While locked up in Kolhapur Jail, Vijay befriended a man called David, who was also in jail for kidnapping and drug trafficking. He thought it only prudent to enlist David's help. He knew that the only way to get the flat would be first to get Swaraj Das to sign some papers, and then he would have to kill and murder both his father and son to get hold of the flat at D N Nagar. He knew he could not do it alone and thus ripped in another criminal and convicted David into his scheme of things.

"Seema, I am training you; you are more valuable to me as a honey trap. Baby, we can make more money this way by duping people than you can make in a lifetime by singing bhajans. You are young and sexy, so what if you are not getting modeling assignments and acting jobs? You can make millions for them and yourself by doing what I tell you to do. You are the perfect gangster, and the information you capture with your camera is invaluable. I will take it from here: both father and son trust them a lot by now, and they will never suspect that I am out to slit their throats. 'Vijay told Seema, who just nodded, that she had no choice but to listen to her husband and mentor if she had to survive in the city. Seema had expenses and needed the money to live in the city of dreams.

Armed with information on Anup Das's financial details, Vijay Palande got him to sign some power of attorney papers. Then, on the pretext of taking him for a trip to the hills of Mahabaleshwar, he sedated Anup and, along with his associate and fellow criminal David, strangled and killed him. He then burned his body and chopped it into pieces. This was Vijay Palande's first known killing and murder, and Seema was a crucial accomplice in this crime of his.

The duo David and Vijay later killed Swaraj Ranjan Das as well; the modus operandi was the same: they drugged him with sleeping pills and then cut up his body, throwing it into the ravines of the Kumbharli Ghats. He then started living with Seema in the same flat Anup Das owned.

In 1998, Vijay Palande and David Das were arrested for the double murder of Das, and they both were tried in court. Vijay Palande got a life sentence for the murder of Swaraj Ranjan Das but was acquitted of the murder of his son Anup Das as the prosecution was not able to link the body to him, and two witnesses had turned hostile, further weakening the case against the gangster Vijay Palande. David, his associate in this first double murder that he committed, was acquitted in both murders due to a lack of evidence. This was, however, Vijay Palande's first dramatic entry into the world of serious crime, and while in Jail for a year, he was tutored well by his mentor, Santosh Shetty.

"Crime bahut bada Dhanda hai Vijay mere saath Bangkok mein kam kar lakhon kamayein ga tu." Santosh took the young Vijay under his wing, and Vijay learned the tricks of the trade in prison from other master criminals. He knew how to forge passports and make fake IDs. He even managed to get a two-month parole after his first year in Jail and never returned. He escaped Parole and went to Bangkok, where he earned his plastic surgery so that he could change his looks and avoid being detected by the cops. "Tu bhi plastic surgery kara le, sada jawan lage ge bakara pakadne mein asani hogi, paisa mein de de ga tujhe." Vijay asked Seema to get a nose job and get her cheekbones fixed and her eyebrows. The duo was well and truly a team now, and from being struggling models and Bhajan singers, Seema had transformed into Palande's well-heeled Honey Trap.

Chapter Five: Gautam Vora Ne Bhi Meri Li

"Sara Bollywood Plastic pe chalta hai sab film heroine Bipasha, Shilpa, and Deepika sab ne plastic surgery karaya hai. Tu apun ki Underwood ki Priyanka Chopra hai, ekdum bindaas kara apna plastic surgery just like Barbie doll." Vijay gave Seema his instructions and then gave her a credit card.

"Yeh! Le Gold card payment ke liye, wo Milton plastic wala uska credit card mara mein, kidnap kiya usko aur ek hafta chipa ke rakha, yeh uska card hai ATM pin 3488 bindas surgery kara." Vijay handed Seema the credit card.

"Aur sun, I am also giving you a new name and identity. Here is your new passport and identity card. From now on, you will not be Seema Dusaj but Simran Sood, and I will also have a new name, Kiran Kanu Bhai Rana. After you get your plastic surgery done, I, too, will change my features. We need to lie low after the Das murders; we need to evade the cops. We will move to Bangkok for a while and finish the surgery." Armed with a new name of Kiran Kanu Bhai Rana, Vijay informed Seema, who had now been christened Simran Sood.

Now that I had a new name and identity, that of Simran Sood, my entry into the underworld was complete. As a struggling singer and model, I had become a gangster's mall, a honey trap. But as long as Vijay Palande and Kiran Kanu Bhai Rana were helping me with money and contacts to help me survive in the city of dreams, I was OK with it. I did not feel I was doing anything wrong.

Facial correction, or plastic surgery, is delicate and involves sculpting the cheeks, nose, and lower facial parts like the chin. Excess fat is removed, and eyebrows are shaped to give a different look to the face. Simran Sood had two facial surgeries, one in Bangkok and the other in Dubai. The second surgery hurt her; it left a long, two-inch scar just below the left area of her shin, just under her lips. But with her green and emerald blue eye contact, she did look younger and different from how she used to look.

"Your job is simple. Simran, it would help if you got barks for me, and I will chop them off and throw them in the ravines. We will rob the rich in this city and live like kings. "Vijay was evident on his goal. He had enough contacts in the police; having been in and out of Jail, he had studied the entire judicial system and how it

worked. He had a brother-in-law, Sanjay Shinde, who was in the crime branch; he had cultivated cops like Amol Deshpande and others who would help him get out on Parole, and no one questioned why Vijay did not return to Jail after his Parole. This was a perfect system and process. He had planted his people at every step, who no doubt shared in the spoils of his crimes.

Dhananjay Shinde was the butcher he had murdered before, and after a bottle of whisky, he could do it again and again, for a fee, of course. They became a merry band of bandits, a gang that preyed on innocent, lonely rich men and slaughtered them for their riches. Simran was instructed to remain young, and Vijay spent a lot of money on her clothes and appearance. Bangkok was a place where they could escape after committing their crimes; it was simple: Bangkok had a visa on arrival. Nepal is another place for criminals to escape after committing crimes, as an Indian does not require a visa to go to Nepal.

Vijay's work was going well in Mumbai; he had a new identity and worked closely with Santosh Shetty. His network of police officers would give him tips on which business people could be targeted for extortion and where in Mumbai there was a land dispute they could resolve and extort money from. They were making money, and the entire cycle of crime was taking place under the nose of some senior police officers. Vijay Palande would occasionally keep them happy by supplying them with secrets of other rival gangs to be in their good books, and they would go soft on him. This is one way he remained out of jail even after being convicted for life in the murder of Das's father and son. It was a perfect game. Vijay Palande, aka Kanu Bhai Rana, aka Karan Sood, was merrily living the life of a dreaded underworld robber, extorting money from shady land deals, kidnapping business people, and doing his dirty bidding. He was able to live a lavish life; he traveled abroad several times a year with Simran Sood under his fake passport, sometimes to London, Italy, Spain, Bangkok, Dubai, and even Slovakia. No one questioned him, and no one cared; he had paid people at the right places, and his crime factory was churning out money by the hour. The system was set, and so was the process. The other thing that Vijay got involved in was Hawala.

He had befriended an investment banker by the name of Gautam Vora, who was a director at ULKJ Investment Group. It was a company established by his great-grandfather in 1903 and operated in the Mumbai stock market. They looked after the wealth of highly networked individuals and companies. They managed stock

portfolios and gave the firm money management advice as well. Gautam Vora was a rich and vivid young man seen in most South Mumbai parties. Here again, Vijay Palande, who had changed his name to Karan Sood, used Simran as a honey trap. Gautam Vora was a serial modeler and only dated models. Since Simran had gotten another role in a B-grade film where she became a lesbian by the name of **Anokha Anubhav**, she felt she could at least be classified as a model, if not an actress.

She would frequent the Godwin Hotel in south Mumbai with Gautam Vora, who would have her seated on his lap most of the time. He liked to flaunt his women and loved to take pictures with them. Gautam had been in controversy before when his girlfriend Viveka Babaji committed suicide, and he had been questioned by the police many times for his relationship with the troubled model.

Gautam Vora was a frequent guest on Financial Networks like CNBC; he was called to give stock tips to the viewers and dole out financial and investment advice. That way, he had built his reputation as an astute wealth manager. Vijay knew that he could sue his firm for laundering dirty money from the underworld and some of his influential political friends in the Congress party, namely Sanjay Nirupam, a man he had cultivated for a time. Vijay was known to organize Holi and Iftaar parties for Nirupam and was also close to the politician during his struggling days as an actor in Bollywood.

Vijay had planted Simran in the Vora household, and now the duo's story had changed. Vijay Palande, now Karan Sood, would tell people that Simran was his niece and hide from the world that he had married her in 1998 in a subdued court marriage.

"Look, Simran, Gautam Vora can be useful to us; he is rich and a womanizer. He has an investment firm through which I can channel Santosh's loot through his company and buy shares in the stock market through the unaccounted back money, you know, Black ka White Karna. Gautam can also take a two percent cut

on every amount transferred. It's a win-win for us all; you need to sleep with him, get close to his mother, become part of their family, and give me all the financial details of the Vora clan as well. That's your job. See, see, your acting and singing careers are not going anywhere, and this is our only way to make good money as your cocaine habit is becoming very expensive. We have to find new bakers, and Gautam Vora fits the bill; he will fall for your charms, and after your plastic surgery, you are looking even younger." Karan Sood, the rebranded version of Vijay Palande, was now ready for his next kill.

It was Simran who made the first move. Gautam Vora had thrown a patch party in the Arabian Sea on his birthday, and Simran arrived just in time to be a part of the bash. She sat on Vora's lap, kissed him on the cheek, then slowly kissed him. She drank wine and vodka with him to get him high, and then she took out a few grams of cocaine from her purse and took him to the lady's toilet, which was empty. She cut a few lines for Vora and got him high; he naturally became horny. Cocaine does that to you. Gautam was hot and wanted to fuck her there, and then she lifted her skirt and tore off her panties; Simran, too, wanted it bad. Gautam then took her to the loo and unzipped her pants. He then entered her and fucked her repeatedly. Simran had no complaints; she wanted it bad; she wanted it up her pussycat. Vora's belt buckle broke as he thrust into Simran harder and harder in a rhythmic motion. Simran screamed with ecstasy as Vora did her again, and to stop her moaning, he would cover her mouth from time to time. This obstructs Simran's breathing, as Vora unintentionally smothers her nose.

This would give Simran even more pleasure; the feeling of being asphyxiated would enhance her orgasms even further. The blood would not flow up to her head but now would tackle down between her things, and her muscles would tighten in a spasm of pain intertwined with pleasure. Simran had never been fucked like that in such a mad and twisted manner. She would gasp for air and breathe, and the more she gasped, the tighter Vora would grab her mouth, thrusting his erect penis into her spotty, moist vulva, ramming into her. She would

gasp and moan for air, but he would keep fucking her till she squealed with pain and pleasure alike. By now, Gautam Vora was half naked; his trousers spread on the floor as he bit Simran's breasts and squeezed them heavily, at times biting her upper lips, giving her more pain. He wanted to punish her, and so he did again and again with his hard penis, bludgeoning her as if it were a knife. Simran wanted it more and more and would rub cocaine on her gums and her lips to enhance her sexual pleasure. The lack of oxygen in her veins and blood was making her feel dizzy and lightheaded, which is precisely what she wanted. She had started to sweat, and her body had become numb with orgasmic pain and pleasure. She gasped and cried out with pain every time Vora rammed her with his rock-hard cock. He did her more and more, increasing his intensity until Simran finally gave in and collapsed on the floor in front of Vora, her body throbbing with ecstasy. After their session, Vora zipped his pants and noted his tie. He then walked Molly out of the bathroom after washing his face and combing his hair. Simran looked out and slowly steadied herself, finally powdering her nose in the washroom. She, too, moved out of the bathroom.

"So you finally fucked Gautam Vora. Brilliant. Now, you need to get into his mother's good books. Yeh! Murga bhi tujh par lattooo ho gaya." Karan Sood alias Vijay Palande had planted Simran Sood in the Gautam Vora household, and he was now ready to use Vora to launder dirty political money.

Vijay had become good friends with Vora over five to six years. They would discuss business and the stock market. Vijay Palande, who had introduced himself to Gautam Vora as Karan Sood, convinced Vora to invest the underworld black money through the hawala route into the many stocks Vora's investment firm owned.

"Dekh Vora, I will hand over money to you in cash in suitcases. You can have a note counter at your office in Malabar Hills, do the counting in cash, and after

that, you can invest in stocks. It would help if you doctored your cash books to turn white into black, but I will leave that to you. That's your area of expertise, mere pas. Sanjay Nirupam aur Santosh ji ka black paisa hai, you need to send money into Bangkok by hawala; maybe buy dollars and send them to Bangkok to Santosh Shetty's clients. I will give you two percent for all your transactions." After gaining Vora's trust, Karan Sood used him to launder dirty money. Gautam Vora was okay with it; he was getting a cut, and moving large sums of money was not much of an issue for him. He had a reputed firm, and no one would know or question him. His family had massive clout in the Mumbai stock exchange.

Karan and Simran would be invited to Gautam Vora's Diwali and Holi parties, and Simran would cozy up to Gautam as if he were her man. There were whispers in the party circles that it was Simran who had caused a rift between Viveka Babaji and Gautam in the first place and that Viveka was so hurt by his infidelity that she finally took her own life and committed suicide. It was a massive scandal in 2010. Viveka had even left a suicide note stating clearly that Gautam Vora had killed her. Gautam had gotten into cop trouble then and had been called for questioning, but he finally got a clean chit in the suicide case. But the party boy Vora was famous for his philandering ways and his heavy womanizing. Now, after screwing Simran, he wanted more of her and had even introduced her to his mother, showing Simran that she was not merely his muse but that he took her more seriously.

"Gautam's mother is a complete bitch, a mind freak, and a total control junkie. She hates me. I feel cold vibes from her. She doesn't think I deserve to be Gautam's girl. She looks down on me." Simran told Karan Sood, "It's ok, this is all our drama. Gautam will never suspect my real intentions; he doesn't even know my real name, and like everyone else, he thinks you are my niece. Chute he is, but who cares as long as he is helping me to launder underworld money? Keep an eye on his Malabar properties and tell me what else the family owns in Mumbai. The Vora family is loaded.

Vijay Palande pushed Simran towards Vora just as he pushed her towards Anup Das.

Simran had perfected her job as the femme fatale of an underworld gangster who masqueraded and hobnobbed with the rich and famous by using multiple identities.

Gautam Vora was a wealthy young man in his mid-thirties. He enjoyed fast cars, sexy women, and five-star parties and moved around with the rich and famous of South Mumbai. For him, Simran was just another model he was dating and screwing. Gautam was known as a playboy in the elite circle, and Simran Sood, aka Seema Dusaj, gave him a lot to play with.

"You know he is always asking me to sit on his lap in the parties he throws for me; I am like his arm candy." She would tell Karan about Gautam Vora and trade financial secrets with him.

Now, after years of jumping parole, Vijay Palande, aka Karan Sood, and his accomplice Simran Sood, would scout around for more people to prey on. Still, for now, the underworld doesn't know Vijay Palande was busy with extortion work for Santosh Shetty and his gang. Extortion was straightforward; all he had to do was make anonymous phone calls and send death threats through letters, and if push came to shove, thirteen people were charged with murder or rape. It worked most of the time, and if the victim's family complained, he would use his cop relative and his friends in the police force to hush up the matter. It was an accessible business, and he had the process in place perfectly. He and Simran also moved to a plush apartment in Oberoi Springs and lived lavishly.

Simran would dress up like a queen and even keep a Chihuahua dog as a pet. "I look after the dog; she is my buddy; you know, she has a passport as well; I take her with me on flights; she also has an entire pet box for herself; she is like my child." Simran would often tell people, but simultaneously, she feared Vijay Palande and respected him for what he was doing for her. Even if she had to step outside her flat, she had to get Vijay's permission and inform them she was going and when she would return. After all, it was Vijay who paid her bills. She had to obey him; otherwise, Simran had no allowances.

"I think you have Gautam in your grip; he is a gullible fool. I think any good-looking woman can make a fool of him. But he listens to me: Mera Sara black ko white Kar diya use." Vijay would often boast about how he had the investment broker in his grip.

Simran would often meet with Vora at his favorite haunts, the Four Seasons Hotel and The Wellington Club, and this time, Gautam was in a celebratory mood. "I have to treat you today, my dear. I am so happy that I have been made the managing director of my brokerage firm. My dad passed away last year, and the board has finally chosen me to succeed him. I am over the moon. Pray that I can take the legacy of Kushan Das Vora Forward from here." He had informed Simran that Vora had been sharing a lot with her these days.

"You know, I loved Viveka as well, but she is just jealous of you; she thinks you are my life's love. She was so angry with me for seeing you." Vora would often tell Simran He was devastated when Viveka Babaji took her own life and committed suicide, blaming him for it all. Gautam had broken her heart due to his philandering ways, and his affair with Simran had led to the final fall and demise of Babaji.

Gautam would spend lavishly on Simran through beach parties for her and even help her put cash on the side. He was loaded and did not mind spending on women; he was a man who enjoyed sex and the company of beautiful women. This, however, cost him dearly, as he was also apprehended by the cops for

helping to hide Vijay Palande after he ran away from Police custody after the Arun Tikku murder was discovered.

Gautam would lose his reputation and peace of mind for having an affair with Simran. He helped harbor Vijay, checked him into a hotel, bought him new clothes, and helped him pay for his ticket to Bangkok to escape from the country and never be apprehended. "Yeh! Ladki ke chakkar ne tumne mujhey barbad kar diya." Gautam would tell the cops that when he was taken for his bail hearing, he was in police custody for over a month until he got his bail from the sessions court.

But one thing was sure: Gautam Vora ne bhi Simran Sood ki khoob maze se li!

Chapter Six: Anuj Tikku Ne tho baar baar meri Li!

Kab mein Seema Dusaj se Simran Sood ban gayi mujehy bhi nahi pata. But somewhere in Mumbai, searching for my dreams to become a singer and a model, I lost my faith and my morality to crime and my soul to an underworld murderer who became my husband, Vijay Palande. I didn't care as long as he supported him; I was happy to do his dirty bidding.

"See Simran, I got your. A new car from Dilp Cjhabaria's stable is the Maruti Esteem, which he has shaped like a Ferrari. It's lemon yellow and green. I just bought one for you. It's parked in the parking lot of Oberoi Springs, and you will love it. You can take it around for your auditions as well." Vijay had gifted Simran with a new car; this was the same car she used to drive herself to Anuj Tikku's flat in Samarth Angan Lokhandwala. She was accompanied by a music director, Jaan Nisaar Lone. Simram had been trying to cut a scratch for her music album that she wanted to show to some music composers. She drove with Lone to meet Anuj in 2010, the first time the two met.

Anuj Tikku was a Bollywood actor who had done quite a few films. He loved to smoke pot and read spiritual books to everyone. I found him to be funny and clumsy; he was a bit fat and would always be seen dressed in OSHO robes. He would also try to teach Jaan Nissar about OSHO and his teachings. We would find some of his jokes very funny. I liked the story he told us about the five women he was dating before he left his job at City Bank to come to Bollywood. "You know I had five girlfriends. I have even written a book about them. It has five distinct chapters: Why I Didn't Lick Nidhi Malik, Ram Ki Beti jo Sab ke Saath leti, Chandramukhi jo kar de sab ko Sukhi, Reeyah honey kya Kiya, and the last chapter, Nidhi Khar ka Vaar aur Uska Yaar. It was a hilarious story, and in the final one, the woman he married divorced him and ran away with her boss." Simran remembers her first meeting with Anuj Tikku in his Lokhandwala Flat—the same apartment that would finally become the burial ground of his father. It was the same flat that would be shown on television screens again and again as the place where Arun was stabbed to death by the henchmen of Vijay Palande. Furthermore, in this gruesome murder, Simran Sood played an important role; she gave Vijay information about Anuj and his family's assets.

I had invited Anuj over to my Oberoi Springs flat, where I introduced him to Vijay as Karan Sood, my cousin's brother. Karan was his usual charming self and gifted Anuj five miniature bottles of Whisky. The two spoke for a while, and then we had to leave for London, so we walked out with Anuj to the garage. Anuj Tikku had been eyeing me for some time. I was sure he was interested in me and wanted to fuck me. I could see it in Anuj's eyes; they were full of lust. We had only met a couple of times. Once in Jaan Nisar's Studio, Anuj was trying to grope me, and he started to tickle my neck, trying to get my attention. He constantly talked about this girl, Anupriya Goenka, an actress he had a crush on.

Anuj was a very carefree guy and was always doped out. He lived alone in his flat, and his father would come over from Delhi to meet him now and again. For a man who was so qualified with an engineering and MBA degree, he was wasting his time doing petty roles in Bollywood. But poor Filmi Bug had gotten hold of him. He was also a huge foodie and a dope Junkie so that I would snort Coke with him occasionally at my flat and, at times, even in his apartment.

I often chat with him in my bedroom while we cut lines of Coke on hot plates. Sometimes, these dealers give us Kachra stuff, so one has to warm the Coke on a hot plate to cut smooth lines; dry lines are more accessible to snort. Sometimes, Nigerian coke dealers would give us soggy Coke that would be difficult to snort, and the cocaine powder would get stuck in our noses, making it difficult for us to breathe. I would stay awake all night wearing silk blinds in my eyes. It is not easy to sleep when you have done Coke all night; it keeps you awake and dilates the pupils of the eyes. Anuj and I would snort Coke and drink Bombay Sapphire all night, which is also Vijay's favorite drink, Bombay Sapphire.

During one of our coke sessions, Anuj got very horny and started to kiss me on my shoulders and cheeks. I was trying to sleep, but he just kept cuddling me and squeezing my breasts. I tried to shoo him away, but he would not budge. He was

so hard due to the cocaine, and he wanted to have sex on Coke just for the experience, I guess.

I jumped out of bed. He was trying to unhook my bra. I had no choice but to jump out. "Please, Anuj, I am not wearing my pants. I am not wearing them, okay?" I told Anuj. I had also warned Anuj Tikku before when he had tried to grope me from behind in the car park. I had told him clearly, "I don't like public shows of affection." I had made it clear to Anuj. But he was not ready to relent; the Coke was so strong, and he was mighty horny. Then, Anuj got up and pinned me to the wall. He took off my t-shirt and then started to nibble my breasts and nipples violently. In those days, I used to be very skinny.

I would not eat much, so my breasts were small, but Anuj did not mind; he had a big hard-on, and he wanted to fuck me. I resisted for a while, but then, when he started to kiss me, I gave in and relented. Anuj took off his jeans and asked me to blow him, which I eagerly did. He had a medium-sized con in which I was an expert. Blow jobs: I had much experience with my mentor, Anup Jalota. I just sucked Anuj's cock till it was rock hard. He then told me that he wanted to fuck me doggy style. I gave in to his wish, but before fucking me, he applied some cocaine to the tip of his rock-hard, erect penis. He wanted that extra sensation while he penetrated my pussy. I let him fuck me from behind me, doggy style. He just rammed into my backside with a firm and hard thrust of his penis. Simran moaned with pain and ecstasy as Anuj had sex with her with violence and vigor. Simran had gotten so used to being fucked that she went with the flow.

"Anuj, please go down on me, like my pussy. Eat my pussy, please." Simran begged Anuj that she was now fully aroused, so she wanted more of it. She got produced, and now it was time for Anuj to have her again and again. Her pussy was moist, and she fingered herself, then put her toothier hand on her mouth and spat on it, then rubbed her wet pussy with her spit, making it moist and succulent, and then, with another great thrust, Anuj entreated her again and again. Anuj Tikku was now ravaging her and having her to his heart's content; the Coke was making him even more intoxicated as he had sex with Simran again and again.

Anuj was fat with a belly, but Simran did not mind that she had had men before; all she wanted was their hard cock inside her, and she enjoyed it. So finally, Simran got fucked by Anuj in her apartment. In the morning, Anuj walked out of the flat and back to his abode in Lokhandwala, happy that he had finally conquered Simran. He was not aware that she was fucking Vijay as well; he just knew Simran as Palande's niece.

"Yeh! Mota is the only child; his father stays in Delhi, and he stays here alone. He got divorced before he came to Bollywood. He has a servant in the flat, but the servant goes home in the evening. Ek Lauta hei and a loner." Simran would pass on information about Anuj to Vijay.

"On top of that drug addict hei, pakka charse iska chutiya katna bada easy hoga." Simran told Vijay " Hmm iska Matlab pehle Anuj se dosti Karni pade gi aur phir eske flat par kabza kiya ja sakta hei." Vijay's criminal mind had already started to work. "You can call him for drinks once in a while to discuss business plans; that will be the best way of getting close to him," Simran added fuel to the fiery plan.

Vijay Palande, aka Karan Sood, decided to act on the plan and would call Anuj to his flat on the pretext of treating him to homemade biryani. Anuj was happy with Karan's attention and would call him KK. Anuj started seeing Karan Sood as a genuine friend and as a well-wisher. Anuj and Karan would spend endless evenings drinking and discussing the Hotel business in Karan's flat. Occasionally, Karan would send Dhananjay to get cocaine for Anuj, which he would snort in the drawing room. When he would be inebriated, Karan would ask him to sleep in his room in his flat. That was where Karan Sood got him to write his suicide note, which he would use later after killing him. Slowly, Karan started getting more secrets from Anuj about his financial details and properties.

Anuj Tikku would drink with Karan, and then, when his tongue was laced with alcohol, he would blurt out his family secrets about his properties in Gurgaon and Delhi. He also told Karan Sood that he was his parent's only child and his father had willed everything to him. This alerted Karan, and he and his gang of merry bandits decided to target Anuj and grab his Lokhandwala flat.

But first, he had to gain entry into Anuj's flat and check it out himself, so he told Anuj that he wanted to stay at his flat for a few days as some relatives had come over to stay with him, and there was not much room in his apartment. Here, Karan did an entire rekey of his flat and took pictures of Anuj's documents and property papers with his Blackberry mobile phone. He also entered Anuj's bathroom and found that the bathroom window had a vent; if it was broken, one could escape from the vent out of the flat.

All the while, Anuj was asleep while Karan did his dirty bidding. Then, a few weeks later, Karan gave Anuj the idea to keep a German lady named Nevis Leginza as a paying guest in his flat as one of the guest rooms was empty. "Dekh, that way you will get an added income, which will help you survive in Mumbai. The lady works for the Spanish consulate; she will pay Rs 30,000 as a deposit and Rs 5 lakh as a deposit amount. We can do a two-year live and license agreement that way." Karan made his move; this was another way for him to put his two boys, Manoj and Dhananjay, in the flat. The agreement was made at Bandra Kurla, and Dhananjay was one of the witnesses.

Anuj Tikku, like a moth drawn to a flame, agreed that he did not suspect any foul play and could not see that Karan was slowly trying to take over his flat. "You see, Anuj, these foreigners are very picky about cleanliness. I will have my boys paint and re-decorate the house as well. Along with that, we will have to attach a new

landline. The consulate requires its employees to have a landline in the house that they stay in. I will arrange for the landline myself; you don't have to pay anything. I will also pay for the agreement that we have made." Karan was paying for everything; why wouldn't he? He saw a three crore flat and spent a few lakhs as bait was chicken feed.

Anuj Tikku went along with his friend's plan. With Simran sucking his cock and feeding him cocaine, he did not care one bit after all; it was his friend Vijay Palande footing the entire bill. His plan was moving like clockwork; he already had the suicide note that Anuj had written, and he got Simran to put it in her bank locker to be used later. The Honey trap was tapping Anuj, and Anuj was playing along with them. But the only one who was not part of this game was Arun Tikku, Anuj's dad. He soon got wind of the fact that Anuj had signed an agreement and was leasing the flat to a third party. Arun and his sudden arrival in the city startled Karan Sood. This was not part of his plan; he was not expecting Arun Tikku to land up and ask questions about who Anuj was renting the apartment to.

This was the trigger, and very quickly, Karan Sood decided to eliminate Arun Tikku, and Dhananjay and Manoj finally killed Arun Tikku by stabbing him to death and strangling him with a wire cord. Simran was the whiny trap here and supplied the gang with all the necessary information about their target. But not before being royally fucked by Anuj Tikku.

THE END