

along
came a SPYDER

APEKSHA RAO



CHAPTER 1

I was being followed. I just didn't know it. You couldn't blame me, really. I was only sixteen at the time. For the past year, my parents had rarely been in the same place at the same time, for more than a month. So, when they whisked me off to Dubai for a family holiday, I was so excited that I forgot the basic counter-surveillance measures drilled into me by said parents. Like I said, I *was* only sixteen.

Yet, I *was* being followed, and I hadn't realised it yet. Though I *did* realise that I needed to pee. I came out of the stall, washed my hands, and decided to fix my unruly hair. As I was pulling all of it up into a high ponytail, a woman came and stood next to me.

"I have something important to tell your parents."

At first, I thought she was talking on the phone, because she was speaking in Arabic, so, I didn't respond.

"Samira Joshi, I have to talk to your parents, *now*."

I turned to the woman, shocked.

"How do you know my name?" I mindlessly responded in Arabic.

"Shh! Keep your voice down, and turn back to the mirror."

"Who are you and how do you know my name?" I asked softly, facing the mirror.

"That's not the point. Will you do as I asked?"

“I won’t do a thing until you tell me your name!” I said, belligerently.

“My name doesn’t mean anything to you. Just do as I ask,” she insisted.

“Take off your veil, then. I want to see your face.”

The woman was heavily veiled, in a *niqab* that concealed her face.

“No! Just tell your parents that I want to speak to them,” snapped the woman.

“Why should I do that? My parents are not fools, to meet a total stranger. You could be leading them into some sort of trap,” I argued.

The woman leaned towards me, and hissed, “You will do as I say, otherwise your country will be reduced to a pile of rubble! Is that what you want?”

I slowly backed away from her and rushed out of the loo. As I walked to the cafe where I was supposed to meet my parents, I kept looking back, half expecting that woman to follow. I spotted them waiting at a table. Ma was reading a book, or pretending to. You could never tell with her.

Baba was people-watching, his watchful eyes taking everything in, down to the last detail. This was his favourite hobby. When I was a kid, dining out was just another lesson in spycraft. I had to observe and memorise everything about the room, from the number of waitstaff, to the exits and cameras, as well as the details of all the other diners — how many people at each table, what they were wearing, and their expressions. When I got older, Baba would pick a table and I had to place a listening device at that table without being

caught. That's not as difficult as it sounds. You'd be surprised at what all you can do with a timely twist of the ankle.

I knew that the moment I opened my mouth, that blank, expectant expression would turn into disapproval and disappointment, and my holiday would be ruined. I was not wrong.

"Ma."

That's all I needed to say.

Ma's eyes narrowed.

"Samira, you're breathing hard and your pupils are dilated," she announced, leaning forward to peer into my eyes, in full spy radar mode.

"*What* have you been up to?"

There it was, the implication that I was responsible for whatever had happened, like they were used to me messing up all the time. Normally, this was where I would get defensive and I'd lose the argument even before I spoke. Not this time. I took a deep breath and spoke as dispassionately as I could.

"A woman approached me in the loo. She had a message for you guys."

Ma raised her perfectly arched brows. Baba was still silent, listening and watching.

"For us? Who was she?"

"She didn't say," I replied, knowing that was not the right answer. A good spy never needed to be told.

"Irrelevant," said Baba. "It's not like she would have told you the truth."

He shook his head. Once, he would have added that I should have figured out that woman's identity within a few minutes. Now, he didn't bother, not after the 'incident', as I liked to call it.

"What did she want?"

"She wanted to speak to you guys. She *insisted* on speaking to you guys."

"About what? And why did she approach you?"

"She wouldn't tell me her name, and she was heavily veiled, so, I couldn't see her face. When I tried to find out who she was, she warned me that if she didn't speak to you guys, our country would be reduced to rubble. That's when I came looking for you. Oh, and she spoke to me in Arabic."

My parents looked at each other.

"It could be a bomb threat. Come on, Samira. Show me where she was," said Ma.

What did it say about my family that this was the happiest I had seen Ma, since the start of our holiday?

A family holiday in Dubai?

Meh.

Swimming with sharks in the underwater zoo?

Again, meh.

Foil a possible bomb attack?

And there it was... the famous smile that had captivated heads of state and dictators all over the world.

My mother could smile her way out of any situation. She was once caught taking pictures of the contents of a Pakistani

diplomatic bag, something that's supposed to be sacrosanct and inviolate. Far from being contrite, she had smiled cheekily at the guard who caught her.

I'd read a copy of the incident report aka complaint, filed by the Pakistani High Commission.

According to Major Irshad Khan,

"Sir, I heard a blast in the corridor outside the room, and I went out to investigate. All the lights in the corridor were blown out. I rushed back to the room, and there she was, sitting on the floor, with the contents of the crate spread out in front of her, merrily clicking photos. I yelled at her to stop and put up her hands. She looked up at me and smiled, and, to be honest, it was such a naughty and inviting smile, that I was flustered for a moment. That's all it took... one tiny moment... for someone to knock me out from behind. When I woke up, the crate was packed again, and that woman was nowhere to be seen."

That was my mother for you.

I led the way to the washroom. It was empty.

"She was standing right there, Ma."

We checked the stalls. But the woman in the niqab was nowhere to be seen.

"She'll be back," predicted Ma.

She was right, as usual.

"I was waiting for you," said the woman, from behind us.

Ma pushed me behind her, as she confronted the stranger.

"What do you want?"

“I have information that will be of great interest to you and your bosses at RAW.”

“Okay. But first, you’ll have to provide some credentials. Who are you and why should we believe you? Also what’s your shoe size?”

“I work for a jihadi organisation that is planning to target India. If you want to save your country, you have to act fast. Is there a safe place where we can talk? This place has too many eyes and ears. That’s why I didn’t approach you directly. I don’t want anyone to see me talking to you guys.”

“I’ll find a place. Meet me here at ten am, tomorrow, and I’ll tell you where to go. But let me make this perfectly clear. You will *not* approach or involve my daughter in any of this. You speak to her again, and my response will be brutal,” threatened Ma.

Any mother will get aggressive if her baby is threatened. But when that mother has the ability to kill you with her bare hands and make it look like an accident, the smartest thing you can do is, step away from her baby.

So, the woman in the niqab held up her hands in a gesture of peace.

“As you wish. I apologise if I scared the child. And, I wear a size six in sneakers.”

Behind Ma, I opened my mouth to argue that I was hardly a child, but Ma squeezed my hand, warning me to be quiet.

The woman in the niqab smiled at us, and swept out of the washroom. Ma and I hurried to the cafe where Baba was waiting for us.

“Ranjit, we need to call Sharad. Is there a safe house in Dubai?”

Sharad Sinha was my parents’ boss, at RAW. He was a handler par excellence. When my parents were undercover on mission, there were times when Sharad Sinha was the only person who knew exactly where they were and what they were doing, and he stood by his agents like a rock.

That evening, my parents set off for the safe house, a tiny one bedroom apartment, in a low cost housing complex. They had to prepare the place before their meeting with the woman. The house had to be cleaned and checked for bugs, and then, they had to install their own listening devices and cameras, to record whatever that woman told them.

The next morning, I accompanied Ma to the mall, as her cover. We had about thirty minutes before we met that woman, and as always, I needed shoes. I tried on a pair of six inch stilettos that I knew Ma would never allow me to buy, and strutted around the store, while the sales guy looked for a pair of sneakers in my size.

“Ma, how do these look?”

“Cheap and tacky,” she replied promptly.

After I stumbled for the third time, Ma snapped at me, “Just take them off, Sam. They cost a bomb — if you break it, you buy it.”

I grumbled about old-fashioned, out-of-touch parents, as I slipped them off.

“Ma, I have a question.”

“Okay.”

“Do you trust this woman you’re meeting today?”

“Not at all.”

“Then, why are you giving her the location to the safe house? What if it’s an ambush?”

Ma hesitated and said, “Don’t worry about it, Sam. Stay out of all this spy stuff.”

“Oh, come on! What is this sudden desire to keep me out of your work? Why are you steering me away from all this, Ma?”

It was true. All my life, my parents had been training me to be a spy. But since last year, they had changed track. Now, they didn’t share any details of their work with me. Now, it was all, “Focus on your studies, Samira. Nothing else matters.”

“Sam, we don’t want you involved in all this.”

“I know you don’t. Not since you came back from Georgia last year. Before that, even when Baba kept saying that I wouldn’t make a good spy, you fought for me and trained me. Now, you seem to be echoing his opinion. Something happened in Georgia. What happened, Ma?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Samira,” Ma dismissed off-handedly, and then, threw me a bone.

“About today’s meeting with that woman, I don’t trust her at all. And, it is *because* I don’t trust her that we’re meeting her here, before we send her to the safe house. I have eyes all over the mall to make sure that she isn’t being followed by her group. When she enters the washroom alone, they’ll let me know, and we’ll proceed to the rendezvous.”

“What if she’s not alone?”

“If she has a tail, my team will call me ASAP. In that case, we’ll buy your shoes, go straight to the hotel, and take the next flight home.”

“What if she calls someone *after* you give her the location of the safe house?”

“When I speak to her, I will give her a burner phone. Baba will give her step by step directions on the phone, leading her to the safe house by a long and circuitous route. So, she won’t know the exact location until she reaches the place. The minute she leaves the washroom, she’ll have one of our teams on her tail, making sure she proceeds to the safe house directly, without calling or alerting anyone. If we feel that she’s been compromised in any way, we just abort the meeting, and clear out of the safe house.”

Ma’s phone pinged. She read the message and smiled. We headed straight for the loo. The woman in the niqab was already waiting for us, alone, as promised.

Ma frisked her thoroughly for any weapons, tracking devices or Comms. unit. She was clean. As a precaution, Ma made her take off her shoes, and handed her a new pair of sneakers, since small trackers could easily be slipped into a shoe. Once Ma was convinced that the woman wasn’t leading us into an ambush, she handed her a phone.

“Keep this with you. When you leave this washroom, someone will call you with instructions on how to reach the rendezvous point. Follow them to the T.”

The woman stowed the phone in the pocket of her jeans.

“See you at the safe house,” she said, pulling the veil of her niqab over her face.

“Wait a minute. What’s your name?” Ma asked.

The woman turned to her, and said, “You can call me Begum Jaan.”

And so it began, a game of chess, with one player playing both the sides.

But this story is not about Begum Jaan or my parents. It involves them, of course, but it’s not entirely about them. This story is about me, Samira Joshi.

What does the average Indian teenager want to be? A doctor, or engineer, or architect, or accountant, or, if you take into account the rising number of kids’ reality shows, an actor or a rockstar. Not me.

I want to be a spy.

And, why not? That’s what I’m trained to be. My parents are elite intelligence agents, aka spies, working for RAW, and they’ve trained me to join the family business. Only, unofficially, though. Officially, the Joshi family line is that they want their only daughter to be a doctor.

Over my dead body!

But I wasn’t planning to go toe-to-toe with my parents over this. A good spy knows the value of discretion over valour.

I was willing to sit for as many medical entrance exams as my parents wanted, and I was fully planning to flunk them all, even if I had to turn in blank answer sheets to do so.

See, I had plans. I wanted to study political science. The fastest way to be recruited by Intelligence agencies was through universities. I wanted to specialise in the Middle East, since that was where most of the current security

threats were arising from. That, coupled with my command over Arabic, would make me a perfect candidate for the Middle Eastern desk at RAW. From there, it would be just a short leap into the field, as an active spy. I could totally see myself as a career spy — leading missions, running agents, evading exploding napalm — doing the kind of stuff that my parents were doing, even as they forced me to bury my nose in a textbook.

Some spies volunteer for the job, and some are recruited willy nilly. But some people are just born to be spies. I'm one of them. It's the Joshi genes, you see. I come from hearty, sneaky, nosy stock. My great-grandmother was famous in Ratnagiri for poking her long and pointy nose into other people's affairs. She would sit on her verandah, prayer beads in hand, with one eye on her prayer book, and the other on her neighbours. Nothing escaped her beady eyes, and she had a very strong network of informants, whom she bribed with her famous laddus. Her daughter, my grandmother, was the toast of the Hindu Colony Bhajan Mandal, at Dadar, for the same reason. Whether it was a rogue servant, or a wayward husband, she could solve any problem. I would even go so far as to say that she was the Indian Miss Marple — Agatha Christie's inimitable detective — who most people assumed to be harmless and scatterbrained when they first met her, but her power of observing people and human nature almost always guaranteed precise results. Then, there were my parents, Ranjit and Alka Joshi, the best operatives RAW had ever had, uber-patriotic, smart, brave and very ruthless. So, how could I be anything but a spy?

But did my parents believe that?

Oh, no! Not anymore.

“Our Samira will be a doctor,” they’d been saying to anyone who asked about my career plans, in the last one year. Like I had no say in it.

I was totally confused about my parents’ two-faced behaviour.

Other parents read Cinderella to their daughters. My Ma used to tell me stories of Noor Inayat Khan and how she worked for the French Resistance.

On the one hand, they taught me the ins and outs of remote surveillance, and on the other, they took me on a tour of the best medical schools in Mumbai.

When I was twelve years old, I taught myself to hack into people’s bank accounts. Don’t judge!

For security reasons, we could never stay in the same house for too long. Whenever my parents got a death threat — which happens much oftener than you’d think — the first thing we had to do, was move houses and rent under a different name, every time.

This time, we had rented a beautiful house on Marine Drive. It was in a very posh apartment complex, overlooking the Arabian Sea. My parents went away on mission, leaving me with my grandma. We didn’t own a car, so our parking lot was always empty. The Treasurer of the housing society decided to make free with our parking spot, without my Baba’s permission. It wasn’t such a big thing, but he was a total bully, and didn’t even leave me space to park my bicycle.

After the third time that I asked him to move his car, we had a very loud and very public spat. He thought he could bulldoze the young girl whose parents were away most of the time. As if!

It took me a week of studying as many hacking tutorials as I could lay my hands on, but I finally did it. I'd heard rumours that he was misusing society funds to pay his own bills, and I was trying to prove it. I hacked into the society's bank account, and found a huge number of payments to a company that I tracked to his name. It was a shell company, ostensibly providing gardening and landscaping services to our housing society. That was a joke, because every bit of free space in the compound had been concretised and turned into parking lots.

I gate-crashed the annual general body meeting of the society's Managing Committee, and announced all this.

The Treasurer was livid and tried to have me thrown out.

"All lies! She has no proof," he yelled. So, I duly provided print-outs of the transactions.

"All this is very well, my dear," said the elderly President of the Committee. "But how did you get these details?"

"Sir, she hacked into our accounts. She's a hacker! Call the police," said the Treasurer, trying to save his own skin.

"First, I'd like to speak to your parents. Where are they?" asked the President, kindly.

Dammit! In my excitement to unmask the guy robbing his own housing society, I had forgotten a very important edict.

A good spy is always, but always, inconspicuous.

My interference led to a lot of uncomfortable questions about my parents, and why they left me alone with my grandma for so long. The conspiracy theorists of the society, aka aunties with too much free time on their hands, were

running a full-fledged investigation into our background, and the gaping holes in it.

So, we had to pack up and leave the house before they cottoned on to the fact that my parents were elite intelligence agents.

My parents were understandably upset about the move, but while my grandma read me the riot act — the words ‘spoiled brat’, ‘irresponsible’ and ‘like mother, like daughter’ were used — my mother took me out for ice cream, to celebrate my new hacking skills. Baba just pursed his lips and grumbled something about a ‘ham-handed operation’. I didn’t mind that, because there was just no pleasing my father. He wasn’t upset about *what* I did, he was just disappointed about *how* I did it. Baba was okay with the hacking. He was just upset that I had attracted so much attention.

Yet, for the past one year, my parents were pushing me away from espionage and towards medicine, without giving me a reason.

What was my poor brain supposed to believe?

So, I was biding my time. The time still wasn’t ripe for open mutiny. For now, silent non-cooperation would have to do. At the right moment, preferably with the dismal results of the medical entrance exams in my hand, I would announce to them, that by hook or by crook, I was going to be a spy!

Unfortunately, life doesn’t wait for the right moment. Shit happens and you just have to deal with the mess.

CHAPTER 2

Six months later

“Samira, I want you to write to me every week, in detail. Promise me that,” my mother ordered, as she checked her documents for the umpteenth time. Yep. Passport, international driving licence and medical insurance, all in order and totally fake.

I rolled my eyes.

“I will, Ma. But will my letters ever reach you? Like that time when you were undercover in Georgia, I wrote to you every week, and you didn’t get even one letter, and then, when you got back, you yelled at me for not writing to you, as if it was my fault,” I said indignantly.

“I said sorry, didn’t I?” she snarled. “How long are you going to hold that over my head? Don’t worry, Sharad Kaka has promised to send along all your letters.”

“Of *course*, he has,” I muttered, because, God forbid that I should be allowed to enjoy life while my parents were away.

“I want to know every little detail of what you’re up to, and you better not be up to anything but studying for those medical entrance exams,” warned Ma.

I scowled.

“Ma, you do realise that this is total helicopter parenting? You’re just trying to make up for the fact that you’re leaving an

almost-seventeen year old alone while you're off gallivanting in the Middle East."

Ma raised her hand.

"First of all, I'm not leaving you alone. I'm leaving you with your grandmother. Secondly, I'm not 'off gallivanting' anywhere. I'm trying to stave off a possible nuclear winter on our continent. So, stop whining," she snapped.

Hey, you can't blame a girl for trying.

Basically, my parents were off to some secret country, to do secret stuff, for a secret duration, and I, a teenager, was supposed to just keep quiet and not ask too many questions.

Not a chance in hell!

I had done my research.

"Ma, I know you're going on a Black Op," I announced.

Ma rounded on me.

"Who told you that? Sam, have you been snooping again?"

"Excuse me! I don't snoop. I investigate," I said, with my nose in the air.

"The last time I checked, using a listening device to eavesdrop on people is called plain old snooping, and you know you're not supposed to do that," said Ma.

I waved that off.

"Can we focus on the important thing, here? You guys are on a Black Op. That means, if something goes wrong, you're on your own. The government won't lift a finger to get you out, and I won't know what happened to you. You can't do that to me, Ma. I need to know what you're up to, and where you're going."

Ma sighed, and shook her head like all the troubles of the world were resting on her tired shoulders. Ever notice how parents do that when they can't win an argument with you? Like the sight of all that weariness is supposed to guilt you into shutting up.

As if!

I tapped my foot.

"I'm waiting, and you're running late."

"Fine," snarled my mother.

"I'll tell you, but you better keep your mouth zipped."

She took a deep breath and started.

"That woman we met in Dubai..."

"Begum Jaan, right? Isn't she part of some jihadi group?"

"Yes. Her group has joined hands with two other jihadi organisations to form the International Terror Brotherhood (ITB). Their main agenda is to destroy India."

"Are they trying to sponsor attacks on our soil?"

"Much worse, Sam," said Ma. "They are building a nuclear reactor to provide warheads for their surface to surface missiles."

"Which means that, soon, ITB will have the capacity to turn our country into a pile of cement dust," I concluded, overwhelmed by the enormity of what might be in store for our country.

"Exactly. Your Baba and I are trying to stop them."

"How, Ma?"

"Begum Jaan has given us the location of their labs."

Ma named a tiny country close to Saudi Arabia. Let's just call it Country X. If you want to know which country it is, please drop off an application at the RAW headquarters in New Delhi. They might write back to you, or, you might get a late night visit from some RAW officers, wondering why you're being so nosy. Just saying.

"Is that where Baba is?"

"No way," laughed Ma. "The minute any Indian Intelligence agent sets foot in that country, ITB will assume that we've been tipped off, and they will first, find and execute the person who betrayed them, and then, they will plug all the holes in their security, which means, we won't know anything that they've planned."

"Where are you headed, then?"

"We have a deep asset in Saudi Arabia, a businessman called Taufiq Raza. Baba's cover is that he's Taufiq's new business partner. We are going to be the latest addition to the Indian expat community in Riyadh. Begum Jaan will meet Baba in a safe house in Riyadh whenever she has some information."

"Won't ITB get suspicious if she travels to Riyadh so often?"

"No, because her whole family is based there, and she visits them very often. Now, forget all of this. This life is not for you, Sam. You need to focus on your entrance exams."

I just rolled my eyes. For some reason, my mother was singing this new tune. Whatever. I'd just show her that she was wrong, and that this was the perfect life for me.

"Take care, Ma, and do try not to get firebombed this time," I suggested sweetly.

Ma replied by swatting me on my butt.

After Ma left for the airport, I helped my grandma clear the dinner table. She was sulking, for some reason.

“Wassup *Aaji*? You look upset.”

“Of course I’m upset,” she snapped.

“My son and his wife have stupidly put their lives at risk, on the say-so of a woman who is betraying her own people. Can such a woman be trusted?”

“Umm... how do you know about this mission, *Aaji*? It was supposed to be secret.”

“I have my ways. I’ve lived with spies all my life. I was bound to pick up a trick or two,” she said, with a smirk.

That was true. My grandma always knew what everyone was up to.

“Don’t worry *Aaji*. I’m sure Ma and Baba know what they are doing,” I soothed.

“Really? If a woman can betray her own people, what is to stop her from doing the same to your foolish parents? She has her own agenda, trust me, and the welfare of our country and the safety of your parents are very low on her list of priorities. She’s just using your parents for her own ends,” concluded *Aaji*, bitterly.

That was something to think about.

For some reason, Begum Jaan had turned on her own organisation, and really wanted to bring them down. She wasn’t doing it for the money, which was the scary part.

If an agent starts playing the double game for money, then, as long as you pull the purse strings, you can be assured of their loyalty. When the money dries up, so does the loyalty.

Revenge is a very good motive, too, for someone to switch loyalties, and such agents are usually reliable.

The hitch is with agents who claim to defect due to ideology. They either make excellent double agents, like the Russian guy who was MI6's best asset, until he defected from Russia in 1985, or, they may be leading you into a trap. Time would tell where Begum Jaan was planning to lead my parents.

Now, the obvious solution to the whole issue was that my parents could turn the information given by Begum Jaan over to the UN, which frowns on unauthorised nuclear activity, and would, therefore, come down heavily on that country, etc. There was just a small hitch. ITB would know that they'd been betrayed by one of their own, and they would find and kill the traitor. It wouldn't stop them from plotting against our country. They'd just get better at plugging any leaks.

So, the powers-that-be decided to go with plan B, which was totally inspired from what Israel did to Iran. They wouldn't interfere with the plans for the reactor, overtly. They wouldn't even show that they knew anything about it. They just wouldn't allow it to be built. This might be a very long and complicated process, but it is such a beautiful piece of covert warfare.

You need a lot of raw material to build nuclear reactors. The UN has major sanctions in place against the purchase of such raw material, and will raise a hue and cry at the slightest suspicion that a country is out to become a nuclear power. So, where do you buy all the million things that you need in order to build a nuclear reactor? On the international black market, of course!