

FEAR OF GOD

VADHAN



TreeShade Books
www.treeshadebooks.com

PART 1

FIRST IMPACT

CHAPTER 1

The man was still as a statue. His lean frame did not move an inch. He watched unblinking, as if it would make a world of difference. He blended with the shadows, drawing absolutely no attention to himself, as if he was the night itself. His eyes, the colour of wet earth, were transfixed at the entrance to the pub. Hauz Khas Village was pulsating with a party-hungry crowd. It was Friday. The following Monday was a national holiday—Diwali, the festival of lights. That made it a long weekend. Everyone was out to have a blast—booze, food, revelry and, hopefully, a little bit of fun—the naughty kind. It was noisier than usual that night. Honking bikes and cars were trying to huddle into the already packed open-air parking space. The impatient occupants of the vehicles were raring to hit the party circuit.

The man was in complete contrast to his surroundings. Like a cheetah stalking a bunch of gazelles, he stood in the shadows of the darkened art gallery. It was past working hours and the gallery was closed for the day. His focus did not once deviate from the entrance of the pub called The Gift Horse's Mouth. A thought crossed his mind: *Never look a gift horse in the mouth*. An old saying that meant 'be grateful for the gift'. The man was compelled to ignore the advice. He had to look into the mouth of this particular horse. It was going to spew out his gift any time now.

His gift was *in* the pub. He was a very prominent man, the gift. A Member of Parliament and young by political standards. In his late forties, Prakash Kumar or the son of light, as his name meant, was a loud man. Under different circumstances, he could have been the future of the country. Unfortunately, he was always in the shadows of a far more influential politician—his father. In spite of being of the right stock and upbringing, Kumar was never going to become one of the great leaders of the country. It was his fate. He was not destined to greatness.

It had its advantages. He was powerful enough to get things done for high stake players. His clients approached him in the shadows for things that could never go public. Businesses, criminals, politicians, money launderers, just about anyone who needed facilitation headed for Kumar. A powerful political legacy and a father who *appeared* to be squeaky clean meant Kumar could play with the system. Kumar argued that high-stakes games were not taboo. Simple reason: they did not affect the man on the street. They only made life easier for the average Indian—more jobs, more opportunities for growth. No harm if the facilitators made some extra cash for themselves... sometimes in crores, and at other times hundreds of crores.

Kumar was good-looking without being strikingly handsome, intelligent without being a genius and powerful with no accountability. In fact, he was the best fit to be a wheeler-dealer. And he loved it! The sycophants around him hung to his every word while gratefully wolfing down every morsel he flung at them. They were his shield. If things went south, they would take the brunt, leaving Kumar

unharmd. In return, they were well taken care of. He had just concluded a deal for windmills. Currently, they were considered a pioneering effort to generate cheap electricity. Could they? It was debatable. It depended on factors no one knew about or cared.

Five years from now, it would not really make a difference if the windmills did or did not generate sufficient electricity to justify their cost. The powers-that-be would come up with something new. In the meanwhile, a lot of work would be underway inducing employment, funding, growth. Or at least an illusion of it. Progress did not happen without activity, but a lot of activity did not necessarily mean progress. Only a few knew the difference and they made the most of it.

Growth. That was the key word of the day. It surely meant his growth, too, Kumar would argue with himself sometimes.

The celebrations should have been in a seven-star hotel at least or in an exotic foreign location at best. Hauz Khas Village was the choice for a simple reason. The Gift Horse's Mouth was Prakash Kumar's own pub through several crossholdings. And his partner was throwing the party. It was just the first stop on the way to other pubs, and finally to a fancy hotel room with a girl in it. A young girl. It was going to be a long and enjoyable weekend.

Prakash had already decided on the girl he would bed tonight. He had found the girl sitting by him attractive. Just the way he liked it. Dark promise in her eyes, hair falling on one of her eyes, a nose stud, a Tahitian black pearl necklace wrapped seductively around her smooth neck, a tight dress and a slight smile on her lips, with just a hint of a challenge.

‘Hi,’ he grinned at her. ‘I am Prakash.’

‘Really?’ she managed to keep the smile intact even when she talked. ‘I would never have guessed.’

He smiled, revelling in his fame.

‘We’re going to be pub-hopping. Care to come along?’

‘Sure.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Archana.’

‘What do you do, Archana?’

‘I party,’ she said.

‘Then you’re in the right company.’

She looked right into his eyes, her lips parting delicately to show white teeth. ‘I hope so.’

Kumar’s pulse was already racing. A thought crossed his mind that he should cut to the chase and take the girl to bed first. They could party later. But he had to be careful. There was no telling who she was. It was prudent to spend more time with her, assess the young woman before making his move. ‘You can do more than just hope, baby,’ he said, smiling. ‘Let’s get out of here. The night beckons.’

Archana smiled seductively even as she slid out of her chair, her arm sliding into Kumar’s.

The watcher in the shadows straightened ever so slightly when Kumar and his retinue stepped out of the pub. The politician wore a long-beaked cap to hide his face. Just in case members of the press had gotten wind of the windmill deal and figured out where he was. The chances were bleak,

yet, it was best to be safe. Being sorry made no sense. It was ironical that it should have happened just when Prakash was pondering safety.

The man in the shadows pulled out a weapon from his shoulder holster. A .45 calibre Ruger Redhawk colt revolver. A loud weapon that could blow off a man's head. He did not intend to blow anybody's head off. Not yet. This was only the beginning. The *very* beginning. For now, he wanted to settle for scaring the wits out of the revellers. That would serve his purpose.

Just as Kumar and company started to walk away from the pub, the man raised the weapon to the skies and fired three shots. If he had intended to, he could have blasted a gaping hole into Kumar's chest without batting an eyelid. But that wasn't the end game. The gunshots were deliberately spaced to give the maximum disruptive effect.

In the close confines of the narrow streets, they rang out like cannon shots. People could have assumed the shots were firecrackers or a car backfiring. Not the police security detail surrounding Kumar. They knew the bellow of a .45 colt. They launched themselves on the politician, throwing him to the ground. Kumar dragged Archana down with him, not willing to let go of his catch just yet.

Someone screamed. Delhi's denizens were honed to the sound of explosions. They were tuned to take cover. Within minutes, Prakash Kumar's armed escorts had surrounded him and the man was being hurtled down the narrow street. The man in the shadows had disappeared. The security guys knew where the shots had come from. They were trained to notice things happening in the periphery of their vision.

Vadhan

The flashes of light as the weapon was discharged were unmistakable. But there was no one there.

The security detail were burly policemen in safari suits. Since Prakash was not in the Z category security, he did not have Black Cat commandos, simply cops. Well trained, experienced men, good to have in a fight.

A black Mercedes Benz screeched to a halt just at the barricaded entrance to the artistes' village. Archana and Kumar were shoved into the back of the car. A guard from the security cover jumped into the front seat. Within moments, the car sped away. By the time the escort vehicle with more policemen managed to get through the frenzied rush of revellers down the narrow lanes of Hauz Khas Village, Kumar's vehicle was gone.

CHAPTER 2

It was a black Mercedes Benz S class that looked deceptively like Kumar's own car, complete with semi-dark windows. The guard in the front seat whirled around, his arm already swinging a round-house punch into Kumar's jaw that stunned the politician into submission.

He deftly slid from the front to the back seat of the big car. Kumar was blindfolded first, his hands tied behind his back and then gagged even as they sped away through the narrow lane, the driver expertly guiding the big vehicle through uneven traffic until they hit the main road. The car braked to a halt. Until now Archana was immobile, sunk into the plush seat of the luxury car.

'Get out of the car, girl,' said the man. He was the same man who had fired the Ruger Redhawk into the sky. His voice was oddly metallic. Archana did as she was told. They left her there and sped into the traffic. Within moments, they were lost. Archana hailed a passing auto rickshaw and jumped into it the second it came to a halt. It left in a cloud of smoke and cacophony.

A dazed Kumar did not know where they were driving to. He knew they had taken a U turn a few minutes after they had dropped off the girl. He grunted for a while through his gag but neither man reacted. He started to kick the raised glass window of the rear door. He had read somewhere

that the tempered door window glass of an automobile was designed to break easily to help occupants escape fire or other dangers. The glass did not give in. Kumar did not know that the glass was bullet proof. He continued kicking, hoping someone would notice.

The bone-crushing pain in his chest stopped him. He gasped. It was a punch to his solar plexus. It had driven the wind out of his lungs. He could hardly breathe. Another punch. Harder this time. Kumar shook his head desperately. He folded into a foetal position on the backseat to protect himself from further assault.

‘Just lie still; it’ll be over in a while,’ said the man who had pretended to be the guard, in his strange metallic voice. Somehow, it had a finality to it. Like a verdict. Like the swish of a guillotine. Kumar was moaning now. He could feel the wetness between his legs where the urine dribbled down his thighs into the leather upholstery of the car. Kumar’s captors smelled the ammonia in the urine. It was a sign of dehydration, most probably caused by excessive alcohol and trauma. Neither man reacted, as if they were used to ignoring anything not important in that moment. Their lack of reaction petrified Kumar.

I want to sleep.

That was his last conscious thought before his alcohol-muddled mind shut itself down in a panic reaction. The mind can only take so much trauma. Kumar did not know how long he had slept. When he awoke, there was no longer a gag. And his eyes were not blindfolded either. He was also not in the car. He was tied to a kind of metal post or pillar. He could feel the cold of the metal where his palms touched it.

Fear of God

He found himself in an empty hall with an asbestos roof. There was stuff lying around—a rusted machine, chains hanging from iron railings forming the skeleton of the building. It was like a disused factory. Not a very big one, though. There was a video camera trained on him. Kumar guessed it was rolling. There was one man sitting on a chair. He was in the shadows, just behind the powerful light aimed on Kumar.

‘How much do you want?’ Kumar demanded. His voice held authority. His strength had returned and with it, his confidence.

Kumar wanted to get down to the brass tacks. The root of the matter. Why waste time. He was a valuable man. So, if somebody had dared to kidnap him, it obviously *meant* it was for the money.

‘What?’ It was the guy with the metallic voice.

Was he a robot? Did he have speech impairment issues because of which he was using some sort of a machine? Or was he distorting his voice like in the movies. The man was in the dark. Except for a sharp silhouette, Prakash could make out nothing.

‘How much money do you want?’

‘All of it.’

‘What?’

‘All of it, Prakash. All of it. I don’t want you to have a single penny to your name. Can you do that?’

‘N-no.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Who are you?’

‘Me? Well, I am the guy who has all his papers in order. But you know what? The officer in the Regional Transport Office will not register my Royal Enfield 500 cc motorcycle because I won’t pay him what he wants. Because I refused to bribe him.’

‘Come again?’

‘I’ve got all the documentation they need to register my new bike, but the bastards will not register it. You know why? They say I have to hire a tout and pay the tout a fee. Apparently, the fee includes a cut to the official in the RTO. If I do that... Well, if I do that, whether I have my papers in order or not doesn’t matter anymore. The bike apparently will get registered in my name instantly.’

‘So, how much was it?’

‘Thousand five hundred bucks.’

‘That’s nothing. What’s the big deal?’

‘I don’t want to pay a bribe.’

‘Then file a complaint,’ Prakash snapped.

‘I did. The Regional Transport Officer, the main guy? He was straight. He got my bike registered in my name.’

‘So, what’s the trouble?’

‘The trouble? Well, let’s see now. The trouble is, Prakash, that I didn’t have to go through harassment. I didn’t have to suffer the ignominy of abuses and insults when I refused to pay up. I didn’t have to wait while people with no valid papers got their bikes registered. I did not have to suffer the humiliation reserved for social rejects by a corrupt

government official who was asking for a bribe to do his job. The trouble is there are thousands of other vehicle owners who suffer that fate. They should not have to file a complaint to get their job done. The so-called public officials are being paid a salary by the government of India. The salary comes out of the tax that I pay. It's my blood and sweat. Why are they asking for a bribe to do their job? How many employees in private enterprise ask for bribes from their employers to do their job over and above their salaries and perks?

'You're not his employer! You're just a common man. Why shouldn't he ask you for money to do your job?'

'Because he's not a whore. He's a public servant.'

'Quid pro quo!'

'Really? Hell, I pay his salary. If I and millions like me don't pay their taxes, do you think he'd like to work for free? That makes *me* his employer!'

'That's the way the cookie crumbles, buddy. Anyway, what's all this got to do with me? Why was I kidnapped?'

'Because you are the cause for it?'

'How am *I* the cause for it?' the incredulity in Kumar's voice was palpable.

'It's exactly what you did for the windmills. You took hundreds of crores as a kickback to get the company that makes those windmills an order to install the windmills in a place where there isn't sufficient wind density to generate electricity. You did not care that the money being paid to this company for the windmills, and their pay-off to you, is government money. Government gets the money through

taxes. You see, Prakash, if I punish you for your breach of trust to the people of India, I believe the official in the RTO will get the message. If a high-flying wheeler-dealer like you is punished, the lowly RTO official will wet his pants. You know why? He doesn't deal in crores. No, he deals in thousands, maybe in lakhs. He hasn't got enough money to leave behind for his wife and kids.'

'What do you mean, *punished*?' Kumar's eyes turned wild.

The man walked into the light of the lamp shining on Kumar, his back to the camera rolling in the background. While those viewing the video would see only a silhouette of a man, Kumar could see him clearly.

Kumar stared at the man, astonished. The sound of the gun was deafening, even though it was not the Ruger Redhawk. It was a .32 Smith & Wesson automatic handgun. Kumar slumped to the ground, his eyes betraying his disbelief. Blood was spurting out of the lower left part of his stomach.

A Twitter message appeared the following day late in the morning from a user with the handle @FOGinindia.

It had a text message.

'5...'

A video that played the entire conversation between Kumar and his assailant was also uploaded. The video was edited, only cutting out the time it took for Kumar to die. Thus, just after the conversation and after being shot, viewers found the politician dead on the floor of a dark room. There was blood all around him. The tweet went viral in a matter of

hours, touching more than ten million users worldwide in the first twenty-four hours with a record number of six hundred thousand likes and an almost equal number of shares.

It threw the entire law enforcement machinery into a frenzy.

By nightfall, the murder of Prakash Kumar was on all national and regional television channels. Experts who were called in by the channels went on record with their conclusions. They claimed to have studied the video uploaded on Twitter before confirming that the bullet could not have killed the man. It was a single bullet and the best estimate was that it was of .32 calibre. They guessed that by the smallish hole in Kumar's stomach. The slug could not kill a man if it was shot into his gut. Not instantly. He could have been saved if medically treated, which was not the case. Kumar was left to die. The bullet did not kill him for sure. The bleeding did. There was blood all over the floor in the video. It would have taken him hours to die. Maybe even the entire night.