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# KAALKOOT

THE LOST HIMALAYAN SECRET



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# PROLOGUE

*January 1944*

*Near Kausani, Kumaon Division, United Provinces (current Uttarakhand), India*

Manohar Rai winced as a dart of pain shot through his wounds. The steep uphill climb had left him gasping for breath, and the suddenness of the departure from the previous hideout made him feel quite disoriented.

But none of this concerned him in the least, consumed as he was by a rapidly rising panic.

The fate of millions rested on his tired shoulders, and he was feeling hopelessly inadequate to the task.

His mood was in stark contrast to the surroundings. The dimly lit hut stood on a hill facing a picturesque valley. The meandering streams and snow-capped Himalayan peaks epitomised tranquility, as did the villages dotting the landscape. At this hour of the night, the vista was dreamlike, almost magical, as distant lights from the valley complemented the glow of village lanterns.

But all this was lost on Manohar.

A million deaths, maybe more, on his conscience. It was just not fair.

He had scrupulously followed orders all his life, never stopping to question his leaders, not even when the orders had involved braving police bayonets or enduring weeks in prison.

But having to decide for millions of people was not a burden that he had signed up for. Yet here he was, thrust by history into this role in the seventh decade of his life.

There was a loud bang in the background, echoing across the hills, jolting Manohar from his ruminations.

He shuddered. It was a grenade explosion, probably at their previous hideout. Had his compatriots made it out in time?

This was not the time to worry. He had to decide. Fast.

He swallowed hard as he hobbled nervously around the hut. It was indeed a dark hour. The World War was dragging on, the Japanese knocking menacingly at India's door. Within India, the freedom movement was in shambles; 'Quit India' in disarray. It had now been over a year since Gandhi-ji had been incarcerated in Poona, his communication with the outside world restricted. An entire generation of freedom fighters was behind bars: Sardar Patel, Pandit Nehru, Jayaprakash Narayan, everybody.

Manohar wondered whether Bapu would approve of the secrecy. But with so much at stake, perhaps he would understand?

A burst of gunfire sounded from a distance, sending a shiver down Manohar's spine.

He turned to look, almost as if seeking reassurance, at the only other person in the hut—a young man of just over twenty. He was six feet tall, with broad shoulders, a firm gait and a steady gaze. For all of Manohar's anxiety, the young man had not displayed any sign of nervousness. In fact, he had not moved an inch in the

entire time that Manohar had shuffled around the hut.

For the first time in the last hour, Manohar permitted himself a sigh of satisfaction. Wherever else he might be going wrong, he was confident that he had not erred in his choice of person for the task.

Manohar opened his mouth to speak, but his voice failed him. Millions of lives at stake. Who was he to decide? He wished to somehow reach the leaders in jail and pass on the responsibility to them. Or, by some magical toss of fate, come face-to-face with Ram Manohar Lohia, who was broadcasting over underground radio from an unknown, hiding place.

But then his memory took him to the village that the young man and he had visited recently. The sunken eyes, the shrivelled bodies, the sheer horror of everything, and he knew that he had to act.

With supreme effort, he summoned up some energy and croaked, 'Beta, the time has come.'

The collective weight of history had just been transferred to the young man's shoulders. However, he did not even bat an eyelid. That, in fact, was precisely why he had been chosen.

'And Beta,' Manohar added as an afterthought, 'remember, you need to wait till the last of them is gone. Till the danger is no more.'

The young man merely nodded and bowed as he left the hut in two swift steps.

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The young man walked through the undulating terrain in brisk yet measured strides. Despite the urgency and immensity of the task, he had an air of imperturbability about him. He walked half-

a-mile downhill, not breaking a single step until he reached a jeep parked behind a clump of bushes.

As he opened the door, he took a quick look at the rear to make sure that the contents had not been disturbed. His eyes skimmed through the numerous small packages, all intricately encased. He paused as his gaze fell on a small package no more than two feet long.

Despite the time pressure, he could not resist opening it. As the casing came off, he took a long, deep breath as he took in the sight—a bronze figurine of a king, dating back to the Indus Valley civilisation—one of the oldest and best preserved historical treasures of all time.

The figurine of a queen, the king's consort, was already with him, tucked away in a place in the Himalayas that was meant to be hidden even from time.

He could not help feeling a small flicker of satisfaction; he had done well so far.

He permitted himself no more than a flicker, though. The job was far from over. And what he was doing now was far more important than all his previous expeditions put together. Far more important than any statues or figurines.

He started the jeep with a renewed sense of purpose. He would have to hurry.

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Manohar, partly out of habit and partly out of a desire to recover his composure, spent the next hour writing his diary, as he had done every day for the last thirty years.

The young man was already out of Kausani by then.

## Kaalkoot

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Two hours later, the police, headed by a British officer from the Imperial Police, discovered the cluster of huts near Kausani where Manohar, along with his family and friends, was holed up. They shot dead every person they could find, including women and children. Manohar's last actions before a bullet went through his head were to burn his diary and to try, in vain, to usher the children to safety.

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More than three years later, a very old nation underwent a dramatic rebirth as India broke the shackles of imperialism.

Over the next seventy years, thousands of books and papers would be written about India's freedom struggle. Myriad seminars, academic forums and panel discussions would dissect the plots and sub-plots leading up to the final moment when India won Independence. Manohar Rai's 'peripheral role', too, would find mention in a couple of them.

But nowhere would there be any mention of the matter that occupied Manohar in his final days. Nor of the young man who left Kausani that evening.

**PART I:  
THE IMPERIAL GUARD  
BANI AND DAMINI**

# CHAPTER 1

*June 2018*

*Colaba, South Mumbai, Sunday, 8 p.m.*

The unruly monsoon winds lashed against the thick stone walls of the Victorian era buildings near Regal Cinema in Colaba.

Every year there would be a couple of days and nights when Mumbai would grind to a halt, as the city bowed to the fury of the south-westerly monsoons.

This night was one of those.

Next to Regal Cinema stood a string of cafes and bars, all tightly shut. Outside the only café that was open, a cab sputtered and coughed as it plodded through the water and wheezed to a halt.

A lean, tall and very wet man with a backpack stepped out of the cab. He walked into Café Mondegar with firm, athletic steps as a lanky waiter motioned him in.

After spending four months trekking through the remotest corners of the Himalayas, Steve Watson had just reached a momentous decision, and he wanted to have a quick drink before he left the country.

He could not wait to get back home. The drink would have to be a *really* quick one.

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Steve sighed as he looked at the water oozing out of his climbing boots. The past three weeks, with only a yak for company, had been particularly tough.

Not that Steve was a stranger to rough situations. He had, in his various avatars as mercenary, mountaineer and bounty hunter, seen more than his share of those.

What was more exhausting was the feeling of having been on a wild goose chase.

Steve trusted his instinct more than anything, or anyone, else. It had, more than once, prevented him from being shot in the head, and, in one instance in Afghanistan, from being blown to pieces by a bazooka. It had kept him alive in the grasslands of Uganda when faced with a choice between being trampled by charging elephants and beheaded by blood-thirsty poachers.

Steve smiled. He had chosen to take his chances with the poachers. If there is one sure way to die, it is to place yourself in front of a charging herd of elephants.

Yet, this time, it seemed his instinct had deserted him.

Maybe Professor Bani Bhattacharya was crazy, after all. Maybe he should not have wasted four months looking for a clue based on the professor's nonsensical riddle. Maybe he should have just stayed home to enjoy the English summer.

Anyway, better late than never, Steve thought. His decision was made now.

Somewhere in his subconscious mind, he knew that the quest would draw him back to India some day . . . to the country and the mountains that he loved so dearly. But for the time being, he had had enough of sleeping bags, stale bread and foot callouses.

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He longed to be back in his house in Richmond, off London; maybe hook up with his on-and-off girlfriend, Angie; have a cup of hot coffee beside the fireplace and retire to his bed.

Steve stretched his legs and arms as he sank deeper into the chair. The first thing he would do after getting out of Café Mondegar would be to head to a cybercafé and book tickets to London.

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Steve had barely taken a sip of his drink when the realisation hit him.

Maybe it was the memory of his Richmond home and the fireplace. Or maybe it was the cartoons on the walls of Café Mondegar.

Whatever the reason, Steve realised, to his amazement, that the truth had been right in front of him all this while, staring him in the face.

There was no mistaking it. Doubtless, there was still work to be done, but he now had the key to it all.

There was no time to waste. Steve yanked out a five-hundred-rupee-note from his wallet and handed it to the open-mouthed waiter as he jogged out the door.

Thankfully, the convenience store down the street was open. Steve forgot his English manners for a moment as he interrupted a middle-aged gentleman talking to the counter clerk.

Two minutes later, he emerged with a recharged SIM and a new battery for his mobile phone. He inserted the battery into the phone and dialled a Kolkata number.

He hoped Professor Bani Bhattacharya was home.

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***Sunday, 8.10 p.m.***

As soon as Steve switched on his mobile phone and dialled the Kolkata number, a computer beeped many miles away in a room in a hitherto abandoned warehouse.

The ‘Mansion’, as the warehouse was known to its occupants, was located in a nondescript industrial complex near Mumbai, and was, by design, completely below the radar of the authorities.

The room resembled an airline cockpit, complete with control panels and computer consoles, yet the tastefulness of the interiors would have done a maharaja’s palace proud. Rajasthani carpets with intricate designs covered the floor. The exquisite drapes had been woven by artisans from a remote *gali* in Lucknow. Even the computer monitors were ensconced in ornate rosewood casings.

As soon as the beeping started, a tall, heavy-set man sitting on a chair gave a slight exclamation, picked up a pair of earphones and started to listen in on the conversation.

As he pressed a button on his keyboard, a map came up on his screen and progressively converged on to a narrow area.

Colaba. Somewhere near Café Mondegar.

The heavy-set man chuckled.

Steve Watson had finally shown up. It was time for some action.

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***South Kolkata, Sunday, 8.15 p.m.***

Professor Bhattacharya’s hands trembled as he picked up his notepad and stared at the ten stanzas of verse.

The room was largely dark, with just one lamp lighting a table cluttered with books. In the background, a shelf lined with more

books cast an eerie shadow. This was the room where Bani, as Professor Bhabani Bhattacharya was known, spent most of the day poring over ancient texts, taking copious notes with his Sheaffer pen and pondering over matters from another era. The other two rooms in his quaint, independent house in Alipore were dark. Bani could not be bothered with trivialities like switching on lights around the house.

He was still reeling from the impact of the phone call. The rather oblique clues Steve gave him over the phone did seem to add up. This might be the real thing.

It had to be in person, not on the phone. Steve Watson had been pretty clear about that.

Bani's teeth almost chattered in anticipation as a shiver ran up his spine.

Not that Bani was a man of nervous disposition. He still retained his passionate yet determined demeanor from the time he earned the nickname Pele as a teenage footballer in his *para* in south Kolkata, and he looked somewhat younger than his sixty-two years. While in his thirties and forties, Bani never sought the safety of a podium as he delivered lectures on Indian history and anthropology all over the world in his booming baritone. He would stand, proud and confident, looking taller than his 5'10", perched right at the centre of the dais, making eye contact even with those hidden in far corners of the room.

Never mind that his heyday was past, the speaking engagements and felicitations long gone, replaced by murmurs of a brilliant mind in decay, of a senile old man and his crazy theories and obsessions. And then the murmurs had grown stronger and had reached a crescendo, until one day they had died down abruptly,

almost as if he had never existed—the ultimate sign of the world having written him off.

None of this had changed Bani much. To him, the world that he inhabited in his inner mind was more real than the world outside.

And yet, that evening, after Steve’s call, Bani was having an attack of the nerves. He picked up his notepad with quivering hands and stared at one of the translated verses.

*The Worthy Heir shall reach the sanctum*

*Only after enduring the four Great Agonies*

*Through faith, fearlessness, stillness and silence*

*Shall the Worthy Heir conquer the Agonies.*

He wiped off beads of cold sweat from his forehead as his shadow on the wall formed an ominous backdrop to the cramped room.