

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

All the money had gone. All that hard-earned money that Jeremy had collected through more than two decades of work, had gone. For now and maybe for ever.

The money had kept Jeremy afloat, a sort of lifeline of numbers and perceived wealth replicated across millions of bank terminals across the world, now all of it inaccessible to him, floating out his reach. It wasn't as if the money had disappeared, it had never existed anyway. Money was just data on a database somewhere. As easily as it came into existence (data typed in), it could go away (data deleted). And as the money was deleted from his account, so was Jeremy.

What was he exactly? A memory on people's heads? With his wife now hating him, what would remain of him in the world after he departed? If his records in the UK government's database were to be deleted, what was left? Was that the ultimate truth of

contemporary existence: that we are all data on a database somewhere, our worth determined by the numeric values attached to us and whether we can keep our names alive in such a database?

These were the sad thoughts that filled Jeremy's mind in this muggy Summer afternoon. Well, at least he was thinking about something. Better to think of that, than to connect with his present accommodation and circumstances.

He was in Harshad's shack. One of hundreds of thousands that fought for space and oxygen in this ugly rash of a shanty town that surrounded the prosperous city. They might have been many, but no two shacks were alike. Their builders used whatever construction supplies they could find: bricks of different shapes and sizes stolen from luxury flats being developed downtown, zinc plates from dilapidated sports facilities, stacked doors that had been obtained after a government building had been renovated used as a makeshift wall, cardboard boxes cut into flat pieces and covering the holes that come naturally from matching such disparate parts into a Frankensteinian home. Paint was also hard to come by, but that didn't mean that the builders had no pride in their creations. They used whatever they could find, so a room could have been painted in 4 or 5 colours, their randomness determined by cans running out rather than any artistic or aesthetic choice. Where stronger or more pleasing materials could not be found, an old Bollywood poster would sometimes do as a window - a flap cut into the material to act as an improvised

shutter.

Jeremy had been here before, in the night when he had met Priya.

That night the sex had been life-changing. They didn't do anything that Jeremy had not done before, no, that was not the attraction. Rather, the attraction had been, and still was, all the other things about sex with her that he had discovered he enjoyed.

One was the feeling of fucking an Indian. The feeling of penetrating, of dominating, of using an individual of another race and ethnicity. That peculiar sensation of rightness, so natural to White men, that springs whenever they have the opportunity to subjugate and exploit the bodies of the other races. Yes, Jeremy enjoyed that very much. To be fucking, FU-cking, someone below him. This was so unlike all the sex he had before, spoiled as it was by equal sexual partners - women who demanded as much out of sex as Jeremy did. But with Priya it was different. He could just thrust his penis into her, like a weapon, with total impunity and disregard. He could fuck her for as long as he wanted and not care whether he was ending it too soon or too late. She was always smiling and satisfied afterwards.

Another guilty pleasure for Jeremy was Priya's age. He did not know how old she was, but she seemed young, very young. Harshad had not answered when Jeremy had surprised him with that question, and Jeremy never asked again, afraid as he was of

hearing an answer he didn't want to hear. It was safe to say she was under-age by Western standards. She was very short and skinny, with no muscular development, little pubic hair and barely any hips or breasts. Why did this make Jeremy so horny? Because it was forbidden to everyone else he knew. It didn't matter to him that maybe his friends and acquaintances back in the UK would feel disgusted at the thought of having sex with an under-age girl, all it mattered was that even if they wanted they couldn't. But he could. And he could do it with her brother's sponsorship and the general connivance of all those around them. In being able to perform this special act, Jeremy too felt special... and privileged.

The shack stunk horribly. An open sewer ran freely outside the window which, even closed, didn't block the smell from coming in. Was it even coming in? Or was it ingrained in the materials which had been made into walls and roof? It didn't matter. All that mattered to Jeremy was that his money was gone and so was the support from his family at home. He was by himself, a fraud about to be exposed by his Indian lover and by his Indian business partner, both of which had an allegiance that Jeremy could no longer afford.

Jeremy summoned his strength, got up from the bed and went to the window. Outside Indians went about their business, always frantic and desperate - a curious sense of urgency given that all that hustling and bustling could only get them a few pence at the

end of the day anyway. Jeremy scanned the street with his eyes, taking in all the quickly disappearing faces.

There wasn't anybody out there that he knew by name.

There wasn't anybody out there that knew him by name.

There wasn't anybody out there that could even speak his language.

He returned to bed, throwing his almost naked body on to the filthy, stained blanket. All the energy that had launched him into this exotic business adventure had left him.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Jeremy woke in the evening from a dreamless sleep to find himself in strange surroundings.

He reached to his left, looking for his wife's warm and soft skin but she wasn't there. Instead his hand touched a coarse, peeling wall. He tried turning on the lamp on his bedside table but instead only found a picture framed with splintery wood. He brought it to his face, expecting to see himself, his wife and their child, but the people in the picture were two Indians - Harshad and Priya. They were children back when the picture had been taken, sitting on a rock in the Ganges estuary and smiling broadly to whoever had been behind the lens.

The details of these last few weeks all came to his mind at the same time: the paan, the sex, the friendships, the fight in the car park and the rush of letting go of all shackles and jumping headfirst into a dream that couldn't possibly materialise

as anything but a nightmare.

His body felt the urge to get up, to collect his clothes, to run away, but his mind started asking questions. He was okay here, he was safe here, he didn't have to go anywhere. Yet, his body wanted to, as if he wasn't remembering something which he should.

Harshad's voice outside triggered a flight or fight response in his body - tension across his shoulderblades and a cold sweat down his back. But why? Wasn't Harshad his friend? Had not Harshad trusted him with his home while he went to the city?

A key was going into the lock now, and Jeremy couldn't stop pacing the small room.

But why had Harshad left him here alone while he went to the city? What had been Jeremy's plan? He had given Harshad something, something which was negative, something not good.

"Jeremy," Harshad's voice asked from the lobby "are you there?"

He stopped pacing, concentrating hard to force his heart to beat slower and so make less noise.

"Jeremy?"

He could hear other footsteps - Harshad was not alone.

"We need to talk, Jeremy."

Jeremy opened the window and forced his body through it. He had to get away, get away as fast as possible from Harshad and from whoever he had brought along with him.

As he ran downhill through the labyrinth of streets, Jeremy

finally remembered what had happened before he fell asleep. Harshad had received a call from the bank, saying that Jeremy's cheque had bounced and asking him to come over to discuss it. Of course the cheque bounced, Jeremy had long ran out of money in that or any other account. He had lied to Harshad to protect himself, to buy his friendship for a few more days in case a miracle happened and their business venture finally went ahead.

Were there footsteps behind him? He couldn't tell. The slum was very quiet at this time of night, but still there were people coming and going from their night shifts. There were no streetlights to show him an escape route, nor were there street names or signs, so he used the house decorations and idiosyncrasies to guide him: he knew that if he passed the same Aishwarya Rai poster twice, the same bizarre house with 3 satellite dishes twice or the same stripped skeleton of an Ambassador twice, he was running in circles.

He kept running, down alleys and side streets (were there even main streets here?). He was running out of breath, his head spinning with lack of oxygen. He had not ran in a long time, and his stomach did not agree with the food in this place.

Figuring Harshad and his other pursuers must now be a long way behind, he stopped in a tiny courtyard, littered with broken stalls where at some point vegetables and other goods had been sold. He squeezed his body under a chipped blue stall that reeked of rotten cabbage. He picked up a piece of mouldy cardboard from

nearby and propped it against his side, completely covering his body.

In the darkness of his precarious hideout, his pulse slowed and he began to formulate an escape plan. He would wait until morning here and come out with the break of dawn. With millions walking these streets tomorrow morning he would have no problem escaping. He could then return to the city, find the British embassy, concoct some story about being robbed and losing his passport and try to get a flight back to the UK somehow.

Yes, he was out of money, but he had a wonderful story to tell. He could start with an article and then who knows, maybe sell it to a biographer? TV appearances, media exposure, and so on. It could definitely work. Would his wife take him back then?

There were voices in the courtyard. Was it Harshad? They were speaking in Hindi and it was difficult to tell if those were his pursuers. They started walking but were they coming closer or not?

Yes, definitely closer. Closer still... now in silence... stopped.

Jeremy could hear their breathing on the other side of the piece of cardboard.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

It took a week to find Jeremy's body.

It was now headless, handless and nude. The head, the hands and the clothing had been thrown into the Ganges never to be seen again. Stripped of these, Jeremy was as anonymous as the hundreds of destitute Indians who died in this city every day.

The Indian police had found it floating in a water reservoir among dead flies, decrepit leaves and decomposed rats. It had surprised them to find a white body in the slums, but they knew that the less questions they asked, the easier life would be for them. They asked none. They collected the corpse, took it back to the morgue and, after no one claimed it, burned it.

Back in the UK the tabloids got hold of the story. A Brit disappearing under mysterious circumstances in India was too good a story to pass. However they couldn't get any credible information about him from their Indian counterparts, and the

widow had been very uncooperative, refusing all cash offers to tell whatever juicy story had led to Jeremy's demise.

And so it never made the headlines.

Soon Jeremy's wife had stopped making a show of her grief to neighbours and family and got back to the business of being happy. She found a new man and after a year was married. She filed her marriage to Jeremy as an experience that had been emotionally damaging but ultimately had taught her a few life lessons.

Jeremy's son still asked about his father every once in a while even though he had been too young to remember much from those days. His mother chose only to tell him the good things about Jeremy: his generosity, his adventurous spirit, his good looks. Still, it wasn't long before he started addressing his stepfather as dad.

Deep in the Indian Sea, miles below pollution, ships, fishing nets and other concerns of Man, reside Jeremy's ashes. Have they found his head and hands yet? Do they try to move together? What is left of Jeremy in this world, if anything at all...?