

A Thesis in Two Parts:

Magphur Past, a detective novel, with an accompanying critical commentary
examining the challenge of character development in a multi-focal narrative.

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Anglia Ruskin University

Abstract.

Doctor of Philosophy.

Magphur Past: a novel.

and

Magphur Past, a detective novel, with an accompanying critical commentary examining the challenge of character development in a multi-focal narrative.

Abstract

This thesis is in two parts: a novel and a critical commentary. *Magphur Past* is a detective novel set in a contemporary Indian city, Magphur. This place is an imaginative interpretation and extension of my experience and memories of Jalandhar. In my novel, detective Sharma investigates the murder of a European tourist whilst struggling with his guilt at having participated in a murder during his youth. The narrative form of *Magphur Past* is multi-focal. Each character in turn is the focaliser of a linear plot through the medium of free indirect discourse. The aim of this thesis is to examine the challenges which this narrative choice brings to character development and the effect of these challenges on the construction of a detective story. After discussing features of multi-focalisation – with reference to the work of Genette, Todorov and Friedman - I identify and discuss the pattern which my mapping of Magphur places on the plot and on the range of character views. I defend my use of free indirect discourse when defining character voice and refer to the work of Bakhtin, Zhongwen and Moretti before highlighting this medium's use in the detective fiction genre. The creative dialogue between writer and character is of central importance here. I move to a discussion of place as a force which brings the novel's perspectives together. I draw on the writing of Propp, Greimas and Malmgren to identify the features of the detective and the assistant before examining this genre trope, and the development of the main detective's character, in the context of multi-focalisation. Throughout this thesis, I see multi-focalisation as a narrative method which can stretch accepted genre boundaries of detective fiction.

Key Words: Crime fiction, focalisation, multi-focalisation, multi-perspectivity, chronotope, polyphony, heteroglossia.

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Magphur Past.

Magphur Past.

Prologue.

Always the same nightmare.

The surroundings change – flowing, colours crossing and mixing like a wild bhangra dance – from temples, sunlit crowds and market stalls to the dark, empty labyrinth of the old city.

He walks down the hot alley. All windows and doors are closed and yet he can hear their voices – whispering, accusing. His uniform is soaked with sweat as he moves steadily towards the glow of the fire. As he draws closer to his fate, leaping shadows cover the walls. He stops at the alleyway which leads off to his left. This is the part of the maze which offers him the chance to escape but he passes the alley's entrance and walks on.

Soon he is standing within touching distance of the flames, facing his fear. A scream cuts through the roar of the fire. His voice? Then he starts to fall forward into the inferno. Harsh hands grab him from behind and make him stand upright.

With eyes that weep and burn, he looks through the licking flames and sees the dancing silhouette. No need to see the man's face, he expects the words to be spoken through the familiar, hateful smile.

“Welcome back, Sanjay. We have been waiting ... Kutha!”

Sanjay feels the hands pushing him towards the voice, through the flames.

When he wakes up, he knows the screams are real and that they belong to him.

Chapter One. Surbjit.

“Namaste, Surbjit.”

He'd been looking towards the group of sweating tourists when he heard the voice and knew without looking that it was Onkhar, the boy who'd left spit on his face when they'd been at school together. The classroom seemed a long time ago but the bully still looked dangerous.

“Namaste.”

Out of the corner of his eye could see more of them – Satpal, Majhid, Dipu, - coming out from the streams of passing people. The old schoolyard gang, bigger and still together. Their smiles weren't friendly and he knew it was time for the chase again. He looked left and right, seeking an escape from the threats and the money demands which would come. So far he'd been too fast for them ...

“I think you have money from the stall, Surbjit.” Onkhar stepped closer, his right palm held open.

Then he was running, fear forgotten, mind and body working together. These were his streets, his alleys, but those behind him knew them too. He'd spent too long looking at tourists. Business would come later ... if he escaped in one piece.

He could hear his own breath, the shouts of those he pushed past, as he threw himself into the market crowd, bracing his shoulders and arms, ready for the angry fists – dodging, ducking, weaving like a mad dancer. No time to think of what Onkhar and the others would do to him in the hidden corners of Magphur. They'd learned new skills since leaving school.

The two policemen looked over the crowd as they walked together. Trying to look calm and ordinary, controlling his breath, he slowed and moved behind them. Protection, for a while. After stopping to look back, and seeing none of the gang, he ran on just as one of the policemen turned to look at him. He switched on his smile for the man before running on.

The noises, the voices and the vehicle horns wrapped themselves round him as did the colours which blazed amidst the yellowy grey dust clouds thrown up by the whining and roaring vehicles. The market was his place. He understood its ways, its pleasures and its dangers. Watching for Onkhar and the others, he saw Sunil, the street vendor, the tray of *kati* rolls held cleverly on his head, and sidestepped him neatly. He'd not eaten since leaving his parents' home that morning and the food smells made him want to stop, to reach out and grab, but he pushed this feeling to the back of his mind. Sunil was a friend and there'd be no stealing from him.

The crash made him look behind to see people scattering amongst stones and splinters. A lorry had backed into a newly built wall smashing the boxes of fruit which had been placed on it. Arms waved and men swore as fruit rolled and bounced through the road's dust. Some was smeared beneath bare feet whilst more disappeared into pockets and under clothes. Money still changed hands nearby. Buying, selling, dealing ... nothing could ever stop business. The gang must have gone in search of different pickings but he still felt eyes watching him. Maybe the crashing lorry, the spilled goods, would take Onkhar's attention.

Stooping to pick up a mango, he stepped nimbly over the sharp stones of the fallen wall to throw himself into the shadows behind the stalls. More cover here. People greeted him and he waved without looking at them as his eyes swept the crowd from the shady safety. Vanisha, selling her bangles, smiled at him and he relaxed. How could she hope to make a living by selling just bangles? On his stall you could buy all sorts of things: belts, linen, clothing, picture frames ... He was proud of the growing business and he should be there now. Smiling calmly, but still watching, he stepped again into the white sunlight and continued his journey.

The crowd was even more tightly packed here with people just able to move. Bodies touched and pushed. All was familiar, so that he felt safer and able to keep the smile which he'd use to charm his customers. He'd survived the chase again. But Magphur was becoming more dangerous.

He made his way as swiftly as he could with the mango juice cooling his throat and chin. Down in the valleys of the crowd, he was able to slip and slide towards the stall. Again he was surrounded by angry

shouts, playful slaps and reaching hands. The dangling bags and pouches held money, he could tell, and he looked for any that had fallen. Nothing wrong with helping your family if good fortune came your way.

His big brother Manish came into his mind and, in that instant, he knew that their meeting would be difficult. Manish's mind was in another place and he'd forgotten the need to make family money. But he, Surbjit, knew how to earn. It was good to be fourteen and full of ideas.

As he approached the stall, all was as expected. He stood still, some distance from his brother, and viewed the scene, shaking his head. Manish, sitting in front of the stall, was looking through the passers-by not even trying to persuade anyone to buy. He tightened his lips and forced himself to look away, angry. It was the same whenever Manish was on the stall. He sat dreaming, his big body hanging over the creaking wooden chair, as he let people pass the silks, the watches, the mobile phone covers, the bangles and the beads. Manish thought he was tough, too big a man for this work.

As he moved towards the stall, he tried to decide how he should speak to Manish. For years he had treated his big brother with the respect due to someone who was four years older and much stronger. Manish had often taken care of him as they moved around Magphur together, carried him on his shoulders so that he could look over the heads. Now the only things big brother gave him were envy, jealousy and anger. It was so sad. Again he thought of his father's words, spoken on that night months ago when the two boys had returned from a busy day's selling.

"Surbjit, you've done well once again. You make me so proud!"

There was no such praise for Manish, on that night or on any time afterwards. Something had changed in that moment. His memory flashed across the many meals spoiled by shouting, the arguments and the fights which had spilled out from the living area and into the narrow neighbourhood. A week ago, Manish had pushed him hard against the wall of their room before storming out of the house. It wasn't his fault that he was outgrowing his space and often got in Manish's way. The pain in his shoulder had kept him awake for nights but he'd said nothing.

He walked round to the seller's side and looked at the saucer in its usual place on the wooden stool. Just a few faded notes. Manish drank noisily from his water bottle whilst watching him out of the corner of his eye. Throwing the bottle to one side, he spoke quickly.

“Little man, the stall is yours. Theek hai?” he gasped.

Then Manish was gone. Shaking away all thoughts of his brother, he began work. Anything else would come later. As for the street gangs, well, he was surrounded by friends who would protect him here. If Onkhar was nearby then he could watch a master at work.

He stuffed the few notes earned by Manish into his pocket, climbed on the wooden stool and pulled at the old canopy, all the time keeping an eye on his goods. Soon there was shade in front of the stall and he could invite people to stand there as he worked his selling skills. Those tourists needed to be out of the sun. His loud voice and his smile were his tools and they'd never let him down. If people didn't want to buy his goods then there was always his offer of a cheap tour of Magphur, his city. The money felt good in his hands and he expected the saucer to be full of notes soon.

The rest of the day passed quickly, full of business, until dusk came and he had to stop selling. The emptier market was a different place at this time. A few groups gathered to talk and cook by the roadside, food vendors continued selling from their trays to anyone left. The smells made him hungry again. The ragged ones showed themselves, some crawling around the spaces looking for scraps. Some held their hands up for money but he moved them on with a flick of his head as he emptied the day's takings into the bag. He waited. Manish's job was to bring the cart to collect the leftover goods, but he was often late after talking or smoking with his friends in some corner.

Then Manish appeared through the gathering darkness and pushed the cart alongside the almost empty stall. He watched his brother's face fight down the first flash of jealous anger. It was the same look he'd seen when Mother had told the whole family that “her Surbjit” would be her most successful son one day and when Father had walked past Manish to look proudly at him holding the day's money. He could

understand his brother's anger at these times. But what could he do? Anyway, there was no need for an argument now. He smiled, thinking of kind words, before Manish's voice broke his mood and stopped his smile spreading.

"What did you do, gutter devil? Give it all away?"

In answer, he patted the bulging bag which lay on his lap and smiled again. His best smile, the one that always crawled under his brother's skin.

"Give me the bag," said Manish quietly, his eyes cold, "I'll take it home for you."

He sighed. "I'll take care of the business. You take care of the goods. Father and I will count at home. Don't worry. You'll get your share." He saw these words hit his brother hard. Even as he spoke, he knew that the pleasure this brought him would shame him later.

No more thoughts. Too late. He threw himself to one side as Manish moved to kick with the mindless instinct of a pack horse. This had been coming for days. Then he was running again, hugging the money bag to his body, across the ground which had so recently been full. Stopping, turning, he saw Manish, breathing heavily, stagger back clumsily against the cart like someone who had taken strong drink. He needed his parents' comfort now. Big brother had become a stranger. The dark anger had visited Manish more often in the last few weeks and he demanded money from the family like never before. A different way home would be safer. The prowling gangs knew his movements so it was best to change them. Comforting light shone from some of the house windows and this made him want to be in his own home even more. Magphur was never a place to be caught carrying a bag full of money.

Yes, Manish was out of control. There were the nights when he fell into the house waking everyone and, most worrying of all, the hurried, late meetings outside the door with those fly-blown dogs he called friends. This was trouble. Again he told himself to push away his pride and learn to choose more careful words for he could only help Manish if he kept it all friendly. So far he'd failed. He slowed down and spat towards the gutter, thinking of his own foolishness..

The Magphur slums. Standing by his family, smiling happily, these were the times that he loved and he pushed Manish out of his mind. The cluttered main room of the low house was used for everything and again he promised himself that, one day, he would live in a house with many more rooms.

Dadiji's voice crackled from the bedroom where she'd be resting on her low bed at this time.

"Mukesh, Bhwana. Is Surbjit home yet? Let me see him." It was the same every night.

There was the mass of his father's black hair and the wrinkled smile which always widened at the sight of the money bag. Once again, the feel of Father's hand, resting kindly on his shoulder made him feel good. Mother's eyes seemed to see into him before she turned away to prepare food.

"Mukesh, Surbjit, finish business quickly, before the meal. I'll make enough for Manish too. He might come early tonight." The sadness was there.

His parents would not say everything but they looked happy at these times. Dadiji walked slowly to her usual corner chair to watch her son and grandson count money. Later there would be the repeated stories of her own long ago time and she must have been thinking of these as she looked on. She watched others' lives in this room where she had once ruled. He saw her satisfied nod as the counting ended.

The meal time was full of the praise which he'd earned along with the heaped bowl of Mother's dhal and curd. The empty space made him think of Manish once more before he joined in loudly with the talk, taking more food.

Later, after he had helped clear away, he watched Father limp across the room to sit outside in the night air. Too injured to work, too proud to beg. The shaking wooden chair was never moved from its place by the open door, a good place to watch both ends of the narrow street. Still no sign of Manish.

That night, he lay awake on his mattress listening to the snores around him. The voices made him even more awake. Outside the house there was quiet talk. One spoke more loudly than the others and the words

were dangerous. Manish was there, afraid, so different to the bully he'd been earlier. Then all fell quiet. The silence made him hold his breath to wait.

Minutes later, Manish's shadow filled the narrow door as he staggered and fell too noisily towards his mattress. No point in asking anything now, there'd only be trouble. Outside, laughter went into the distance. He needed to sleep for the sake of tomorrow's work.

Then Manish started to cry quietly. He began to go to him. But then he fell back until all was quiet again.

*

Chapter Two. Sashi.

He was going through hell. From the start of the day, since taking the wheel, the pain had swept through his head and eyes making him screw up his face behind the sunglasses. Lack of sleep, too much smoking. The crowd parted slowly, too slowly, as the bus laboured towards the hotel. Garha Road, leading away from Magphur Airport, was choked with traffic and there was the usual hold up as cars, carts and trucks squeezed into one line near the dusty green of Pudha Park. Everyone was trying to get to work. He heard, and felt, the thumps on the side of his precious vehicle as the motorbikes edged their way forward in the narrow gap between the bus and the cars next to it. There was a time when every blow would have been an insult to the work he'd put in to keep his white second hand Toyota Hiace minibus clean and respectable. That feeling had passed. His eyes moved painfully, miserably, over the empty food cartons and the plastic bottles which rolled across the flat surface above the dashboard. Passengers had seen this and he was ashamed.

He threw the mess out of his mind to look at the passing motorbikes, and the yellow roofed *tuk-tuks*, trying to spot a familiar face. All was well. No-one was there to watch or threaten him and he was able to relax amongst the noise. In front, a small child lost its grip on the mother's back and fell onto the road. A man put down his bundle and picked up the girl before passing her back. He remembered clinging on, years ago, to anything as his father guided the family motorbike, also carrying mother and two sisters, through Magphur. The city had grown so much and driving was such a danger. A swaying rickshaw skidded and turned sideways, blocking the way. He controlled his anger as everything slowed again and kept his calm work face in place. The bus horn was useless in the traffic noise, but hitting it now and then showed his passengers that he was trying his best.

He shook his head and removed his hands from the steering wheel, impatient inside, before turning, head throbbing, to face his clients, allowing them to see his friendly smile.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I promise we will be at your hotel in the next five minutes.”

The bus jerked further this time. Nothing wrong with aiming to arrive sooner, a quicker journey meant more tips. He joined the line in Cantonment Avenue which led left into the heart of the old city. This was the easiest part of the route, most people were heading for the new development – the tall, distant buildings which wobbled and glinted in the morning haze. He wrenched the wheel into a tight turn and edged in front of the yellow school bus, keeping his watering eyes straight ahead, ignoring the angry shouts of the other drivers.

The clients' pink faces, framed by the driving mirror, swayed. None smiled. He braked savagely, hearing their surprised grunts and moans, as a man appeared from the crooked buildings of Mahindra Road on his left, pushing a cartload of wood. Another stop! Now he hit the horn button furiously with the palm of his hand, again and again. Ahh, his head hurt!

Waiting, swaying with the pain, he began to consider his passengers and their money. Not many people sitting in the back, fewer every day. Like a blow to his face, Mr Kandha's words, yesterday in front of The Hotel Kohala, came to him. "This hotel will not tolerate unreliability! My guests have been waiting to be taken to the airport. Now they're late..." The hotel manager refused to pay him and would not be speaking to him again. The clients had looked at him with disgust, not for the first time. His family had looked the same. How had they found out? Anyway, the Kohala was a fly-blown shit-heap. Today would be better.

Trying to put his sunglasses in the breast pocket of his white shirt, he noticed how the stitching had come loose. He threw the glasses amongst the food packets behind his wheel and glanced at his watch yet again. Seven minutes late, not good. No point in hitting the horn to make his head split. Life was coming apart like his shirt material: his work, his looks, his family life. The gang was watching, he knew it, and this scared him; scared him for Mina and the new baby. There'd been more arguments at home this week - last year's marriage was rotting too soon.

Good. Movement again. Soon he'd be across the Thind Roundabout, with The Park Hotel just beyond. This had been a grand area once, his parents had told him, and the hotel a sight to see. Not anymore. Fine

buildings had been flattened to widen the road. Relaxing, he hoped that the foreigners would be generous. He looked in his driving mirror, sizing up the people behind him. Who'd need their cases carried? Who looked the richest?

The old lady hadn't smiled once since she'd stepped off the train to struggle with her cases towards his bus, swearing at the dust. A strange woman! The way she jerked her head to turn the helping hands away. Her tiredness made her drop the two cases, giving him his chance to step forward to pick these up. The other porters couldn't face his hard stare. She was his customer.

"Ma'am, step into my bus. The best one in all Magphur."

No reply.

Her face showed pain as she boarded and this look hadn't changed. The lady had probably not spoken or eaten during the long train journey from Delhi. Her hair was damp with the sweat which ran down the side of her face as she looked hard at the passing streets through the window dirt. His smooth words wouldn't work on her and he didn't expect to see her rupees. Well, he'd keep trying. No choice.

The bus had been bought with some of his uncles' money and now he thought guiltily of how he used to clean and polish it every evening after the work was finished. Counting tips had once taken him about half an hour, now the job was done within minutes. He looked at The Park Hotel's list of names, taped to the top of his dashboard. Doris Seebold. Tough, stubborn. She'd test his skills...

The next passenger on the list couldn't be more different. Young, about twenty-four, the same age as Mina. Amazed, he watched her remove the linen scarf from her head to dab at her face, blinking as she removed her sunglasses. Her rich, red hair glowed and danced as the sunlight caught it. She raked the open fingers of both hands through the long, thick curls to move them away from her neck and shoulders. She was feeling the heat but it was as though she wanted to live every second of the journey. Her big blue eyes drank in Magphur whilst the old lady cast it away.

He remembered how his eyes had been fixed by the black silk of Mina's hair when they were alone. But he'd never seen her move her hair like this woman. And the colour! He jerked his eyes back to the road and stopped as a cow wandered. This time he waited patiently. He'd save a special smile, for he could always charm the younger ones into giving him something. His head suddenly felt better.

As the bus started forward again, he saw how the red haired girl smiled at the young man who was sitting on her right. Without doubt, this was her husband. An Indian man of about twenty-five. His age. A strange couple! How had they come to know each other? The man's eyes stared ahead, face in thought. Then he looked down at her, like she belonged to him, to speak quickly, angrily. The red haired one replaced her headscarf and sunglasses.

An interesting pair. The man looked like a movie gangster, someone used to getting what he wanted. Did he want to be alone with his girl? Did he consider the red hair and the pale face beautiful? He looked again at the man's hard, still face. Yes, he'd seen this passenger before. Where? Not on the bus. His couldn't think like he used to. The list told him their names, Rajid and Rhiannon Patel. A strange marriage. How was the girl's name spoken? He tried to speak the word to himself.

The old man's face was like ashes, lined and worn. Many of the temple statues showed more life. The thin body twisted as each pothole was struck but the eyes did not open to the sights and sounds of Magphur and, for a few seconds, he thought with fear that he'd lost a customer. Name? Ralph Thomas. At last the old one was gazing out of the dust streaked window but the look held no light, was weary with the sight of everything - like someone waiting to die. Come on, think about the last part of the journey. Soon his passengers would be at the hotel and he'd be richer, he hoped. Ralph Thomas was gathering his belongings before any of the other passengers, moving with sudden energy. His luggage, a suitcase and a bag, was not large and would be easy to carry. This man had travelled before. Hopefully, this meant he knew how to tip

The Park Hotel was there. He turned the bus in a wide arc, around the dusty car park. That usually woke people up. Not many cars had been left in front of the hotel and he had the space for this part of the act. Stopping, he stood to face the passengers with his most dazzling smile. The main work was beginning.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached!”

He stepped quickly forward to where most of the passengers’ luggage was piled up just behind his seat. Doris Seebold had looked angry as he’d placed the cases and bags in a crooked pile at the start of the journey. Ralph Thomas had kept his own things. He bowed as he moved, carefully lifting belongings down on to the smoothest part of the ground. When this was done, he reached his hand in an offer of help to Doris as she looked at the steps. She ignored him, her face like stone. No tip, but still he smiled. Then he saw Surbjit, running around the side of the hotel. He watched, hiding his anger, as the little street dog took up a position far enough from the main entrance so that the hotel attendants would be unable to move him on without a scene but close enough to the bus so the guests would have to pass him. What the hell did he want? What else but money for carrying the cases.

The shout broke his thoughts.

“My money! My wallet! C’mon, which of you bastards stole my wallet?”

Rajid Patel was standing in the doorway of the bus, face sharp with fury, looking down on everyone like the demons in the old stories. It was always the same with the type of Indians who came to Magphur from another country. This man looked Indian but his voice was not. The shouting face was known to him. From where? That bloody Surbjit was running across the courtyard towards the bus, sensing money as Patel got down amongst the startled passengers. Swiftly, he stepped forward, palms together, to stand between Ralph, Doris and Rajid Patel. Not the work he wanted, peacekeeping, but it could bring a reward.

Everything happened quickly. Suddenly Rajid was facing him and his right arm was swinging upwards, the fist a hard weapon. As in a street fight, he threw himself backwards – away from harm - and in that blurred moment he remembered where he’d seen this goonda before.

The fist grazed his chest, ripping open his shirt. He balanced and gazed, open mouthed. Patel was coming after him. Turning his head away from the blow, he saw Surbjit running towards them, shouting. His anger flamed. Patel's throat was in his hands and he began to squeeze the sweating, pulsing neck, ignoring the tearing, the scratching at his bare chest. Patel's fist was pulled back to smash him and then Surbjit was hanging on to the moving arm, stopping the pain from coming. With a roar, Patel, mad, jumped, twisted and escaped. The neck slipped out of his grasp and he too screamed his feelings.

Suddenly she was there, standing on the top step of the bus exit, in the space where her husband's rage had begun. He gazed again at the red hair as Rhiannon Patel moved to stand beside her husband to place a hand on his shoulder. Rajid, his breath coming in short gasps, turned quickly to face his wife. Would he hit out again? His breathing slowed when he heard the calm, firm voice. The words were strange, but their sound soothing.

"Rajid, enough! Stop now! You gave me the wallet to look after. Remember? Before you went to sleep."

Rajid's eyes were unseeing, still full of violence, but she held her husband's stare and wouldn't let it go, willing him to come back to himself. She raised the square, black wallet, bulging with notes, and held it before her husband's face. Her gaze strengthened, her eyes watched him and he returned. His shoulders dropped and the fight left him.

This was the time to be in charge of the group of passengers again. It was his duty and he needed to save something from this day. It wasn't worth approaching the Patels again, they were in their own world. But the others were still nearby. Then he saw Surbjit carrying the old ones' largest bags. They were listening to Surbjit's chatter! Somehow the boy had charmed their interest and they'd probably pay him well. So, the boy had taken the chance. Perhaps he deserved it for helping in the fight. For him, it was another day wasted.

*

That night, he lay in the darkened room trying to be at peace. The hashish pipe had fallen and rolled to lie somewhere at his side and he'd heard himself moan feebly as his father picked it up to move it from his reach. The voices of Mina and the baby had long since moved upstairs to their part of bedroom, behind the curtain. He could hear his parents' serious, low voices coming down from the roof. They always went there to give Mina time to settle the child. It was good to be alone, numbed for a while, for soon, too soon, he'd have to be out on the streets again.

His muddled mind shifted through the day's scenes: the rattling bus, the angry faces of his family and his clients, the Magphur traffic. He'd squeezed Patel hard! Then he remembered the time, further back, when hands cut into his own throat and the quiet voice washed over his face.

"We need you and your bus, Sashi. Don't say no ... ever."

And it came to him, as his breathing steadied, that this was the time when he'd first seen Rajid Patel, standing behind the grinning faces of the street gang, at the back of the crowd, watching him being threatened ... He'd agreed to something, anything to make them go away. They'd return, soon. The waiting was part of his torment and the pipe relieved this.

There was another image before the sweet sleep came. Strangely, he saw the man, Ralph Thomas, face full of old, dead pain as he looked at the Magphur streets.

Chapter Three. Ralph.

That night he looked out of his hotel room window at the lights which were taking over the city. The journey had been exhausting, not much sleep, and he couldn't close his eyes now as he tried to kill memories by emptying another whisky glass. The reason for his return remained constant, despite his attempts to stupefy his brain. An old man chasing his youth? No, it was more than that.

Magphur had changed. The newer, squarer buildings dwarfed the areas which he thought he remembered. The noises and the smells, which had stayed in his mind over the long years, were the same but the city was much more crowded. New buildings, new wealth. Voices in the corridor made him tense again. The feeling of waiting for a knock on the door was driving him mad. Who the hell knew he was here apart from the hotel staff? The drink couldn't relax him. Still, he knew it would black him out eventually. Always did. He took another slug and gave thanks for the mini bar. Wouldn't have been one of those in the old days.

Christ! Where had his life gone? How long had he been sitting here? Five hours? Six hours? Trawling through his past. He'd been a teenager in Magphur, left it a man. How old would she be now? His fear began to grow and, quite suddenly, as though anxious to cling to pleasant things, he found himself thinking of the boy who'd carried his cases earlier. He didn't usually give money to anyone, but that boy - Surbjit - had a way with him. That smile, full of confidence and trust. It had worked. He'd meet the boy at eight o'clock tomorrow morning at the Sikh Temple in Archa Square, hangover or not, before the heat of the day could take its grip. Must be getting soft! Still, something to look forward to.

The past came again and he tried to wash it away: throat stinging, eyes closed, head tilted back. Cheap stuff but it was working. Soon he would be unconscious, pain free. The old lady's face, the one on the coach, drifted into his swimming brain. Those grey eyes locking onto his face, as though the old girl wanted to remember every feature of his appearance. Some time since a woman had eyed him so closely. She'd certainly seen better days. So had he. Those eyes wouldn't leave him. The image of the boy's smile calmed him again.

Then there was the fight. He'd not seen such blind anger for many years. Not since the night of the riots, long ago. He reached angrily for the whisky bottle again as though cursing the oily liquid for not doing its job properly. Drinking was a skill which he'd perfected over the years. A type of sleep had to come.

There was a gentle tap at the door. He sat up, became calm again and placed his empty glass on the window sill. He staggered towards whoever it was that was waiting for him. The opened door showed him the grinning face of the hotel receptionist. Then he looked down at the wide eyes and the beaming smile of Surbjit. What time was it for Christ's sake? The door frame gave him support as he tried to form words. The panting receptionist beat him to it.

"I am so sorry," he said, hands spread wide. "I could not stop him ..."

Snorting laughter escaped him. So, the crafty little bastard had noted his room number earlier just so he could drop him this reminder. The kid was a good operator.

"Sah, I would like to remind you to bring your hat, your camera and some water tomorrow. We shall meet at eight o'clock in the morning."

Surbjit's words made him laugh even more. He had to say something before closing the door and returning to the bottle. The words came thickly to his ears.

"Don't worry ... I'll be there ..."

He watched, swaying, as the relieved receptionist placed his hands on Surbjit's shoulders and guided him down the corridor. As he clumsily pushed the door closed, he heard the boy's running footsteps followed by the flunkey's angry shouts.

He slumped, wheezing, into the chair and groped for his bottle. No point in wasting valuable drinking time.

*

The flames licked Magphur. Screaming, open mouthed faces came close to him as he ran holding the bundle. Someone grabbed his legs and he fell. Hands clawed at his clothing, searching for something, as he forced himself to his feet. He ran through the shifting crowd looking wildly for safety. Then the hands which were restraining him melted away and one man, of huge build, stood before him blocking his path. It was time. He threw himself towards the outstretched arms and, casting the bundle to one side, dug his fingers into the man's face, into his eyes. He was hitting, hitting, sending his clenched and bloodied fists down towards those eyes, causing mindless damage.

He was up and moving haphazardly towards the safe haven of those gates. The wailing of a distressed child came to his ears. He stopped and stared. The woman was standing before him, looking into his face, showing her pain. The pitiful crying, the small reaching hands, stayed with him as he ran.

The golden star came again, closing his eyes with its brightness.

*

He woke with a grunt and winced as the sun stabbed his eyes. The familiar, sandpapery taste wrapped itself around his tongue. His flickering eyes took in the shifting buildings ... he was viewing the world through an empty, distorting bottle. This one somehow stood near his eyes, at an angle. What the hell ...? His head lay on the left arm of the chair, his sleeping place. He shifted through the pain in his stiff neck. Christ! Must do something about the stains on the old suit. Breathing, wheezing, he tried to take in the true view, to move away from the night pictures which had punched a hole in his brain. Hadn't dreamt that one for ages. So real! He closed his pulsing eyes and went through the routine of pushing the panic to the back of his mind. Fat chance! He'd have to get through the day as he always did, with his hip flask. At least he wasn't shaking. Flexing his numb left arm, he saw his watch. Seven thirty.

Surbjit's smile, one of the last things he'd seen before returning to the bottle, focused his thoughts. A tour of the city? To hell with that! No point in forcing his aching joints around Magphur. Bad enough trying to move around here. In the bathroom, the pain in his gut started to well up. The first pills of the day steadied

him but still he held on to the edge of the sink, fighting the nausea. That dose would keep him going for a while... life savers but he gave silent thanks that he wouldn't have to take the bloody things for much longer. This feeling would overwhelm him one day and the end would come quickly. The doctor had been pretty certain that his drinking would speed things up. So be it. The tap water cooled his face and he balanced his way back to the window to push it open. The first street sounds, the smells, of the day worked their way into his straightening body. Now he was alive.

He was walking, not too stiffly, towards Archa Square. His camera case weighed heavily and he adjusted the strap on his left shoulder. Moving made sweat trickle down his face and he brushed it away irritably. Still, this was better than sitting down, waiting for God knows what. The streets would become busier and that the heat would rise. This was a good time to view the city. The Sikh Temple – with its golden, domed roof and decorated, pillared archway – was there and, in his mind, unchanged. No need for a camera when memories were so sharp. The bearded guard's bloodshot eyes followed him. The green turban and the spear were there. Suddenly, Surbjit was standing before him and he was returning the smile. The hangover would go. He held out his hand, introducing himself. This seemed right.

“Ralph.”

“Mister Ralph, you will come with me. I show you Magphur. ”

And so the tour began with Surbjit leading the way, talking. The old city. He walked, waving away the street sellers and beggars, young and old ... a skill which never died. Sometimes his evil look was enough. After a while, Surbjit's voice seemed to fade away before his own private commentary. He was back. The Amraj Palace where the governing council of Magphur met; he wondered if they did now. The Hindu temple, its door the shape of a tiger's maw and the towering minaret from which the few Muslims were called to prayer. Kumar Street, a wealthy area, still had the high white walls of cracking plaster and the wrought iron gates which, he knew, opened on to secluded, shady gardens. Inside there would be high ceilings and the cool, patterned floors.

Kambaya Place lay at the edge of the better area. At the end of the rutted pavement, beyond the banyan trees, was the poorer quarter. There would be the flat roofed dwellings of different sizes and colours, their doors opening directly on to the street. Perhaps there were the stalls, the few goods, a way of making a living.

The shade, just past Kambaya, gave him a place to rest. Panting, he pulled the strap over his head and thrust the camera towards his guide. Let him carry it for a while. No doubt he'd ask for more money later. The water from the boy's bottle tasted vile and he reached into his back pocket for his whisky, eyes sweeping the surroundings. Yes, those houses were still there, the ones with the outside stairs. He'd visited many of them when he worked in the city. But nearby there was a stretch of rocky earth where more such buildings, a community, had once been. Workmen were erecting scaffolding in one corner of this emptied area. He scanned the changing scene and snorted at the absurdity of what he saw next. There was a new building ... the Kachmal Cinema and Bowling Alley. Surbjit saw the direction of his gaze and his smile widened.

"That is very good place. Not old. We – my father and me – have been there one time. You want to see inside ...?",

No time to waste on that. Pouring his mouth full of whisky, replacing his flask, he made his way, swallowing then breathing heavily, across the stony ground, to the place where he knew the market would be. At least he hoped it was all still there. The sound of the boy's words continued. Then the smells and the sights of the market place surrounded him. More like it! This was the Magphur which he remembered; the time before the riots. He wandered through the stalls turning once to see the boy, quiet now, following, watching him closely. There were others watching him too, he could feel them near. Closing his eyes, he stood amongst the smells, the chaos. Once more, back in that time, he felt her hand in his, saw her smiling up at him.

Then, quite suddenly, the exhaustion came and he felt himself rocking. It was happening again. The doctor had warned him to expect this more often as the end approached. He sensed, and then saw, Surbjit alongside him. The boy was standing behind an old, high backed wooden chair which he had grabbed from somewhere. He sat and fanned himself with his Panama. Time to head back to the hotel. Enough living – past and present - for one day. He turned to Surbjit, thought about dredging up his Hindi, and then spoke loudly and clearly like a tourist. He'd been hiding from that other life for long enough and speaking the old language would do him no good.

“Thank you, young man. You’ve been an excellent guide. Time to pay.”

The bundle of rupees felt sweat damp as he pulled them from the inside pocket of his jacket. Walking was hell these days. Peeling the first three notes from the roll, he paused. Ridiculous, being careful with money at this stage. No point. But this was Magphur. Best not to flash too much money about in the street, he'd be surrounded. He offered the limp paper and waited for the haggling to begin. The words surprised him.

“We have said four hundred rupees, sah. You pay me after I take you back to hotel.”

This boy knew how to build up good will with customers. He wouldn't turn away a larger tip later. Mention of the hotel made him think of the air conditioning, that rumbling fan, fingers nursing the grooves of his solid, full glass.

It was as he was standing up to move that he noticed the tall man moving, smiling, towards him, the ornate dagger dangling at his waist. The hair and the beard were long and matted, the robes, once white and whole, showed street dust and river mud. Some sort of holy man? He tensed, locking his eyes on the dark, lined features, his view blurred. The crowd seemed to part before the easy, loping stride. The sense of things ending came again. It could come at any time, he knew, but he hadn't expected death to look like this. He stood blinking, heart beating. The ragged man was in front of him, reaching, friendly, broken teeth grinning in the middle of the spreading beard. He reached for the claw-like hand, ignoring the boy's shout.

The pain started slowly but built up quickly. His fingers were gripped in a vice and his bones moved as the man increased the pressure whilst the mad laugh boomed. He shouted in confused pain, sinking back on to the wooden chair. He sensed Surbjit struggling to separate the root-like hand from his own. The surrounding shouts faded.

Then it was over. The pressure ended. He opened his eyes to find himself slumped crookedly, faces gazing down at him. His attacker was being led away, into the crowd, by two uniformed policemen trying to stop that lung-shaking laugh with their blows and prods. The mane of hair disappeared. His hand throbbed, not belonging to him, but he was slowly able to unfold it, flexing his fingers. Nothing broken. People were leaving him, the fun over. Only Surbjit looked at him with any sympathy.

“I am so sorry. That has happened to many people. He is not a normal man.”

He suddenly felt very alone in a strange country. At least he was alive ... for the time being.

“Get me out of here, Surbjit.” His voice shook. “I need to be home.”

Accepting the boy’s help, he pushed himself to his feet. No time for pride now, he needed support. Surbjit cleared the way with his voice, back through the old town. Damn this body! There was a time when he would have seen the trouble coming. It would be good to end this pain. A bruised hand was the least of his worries. As he walked beside Surbjit, moving steadily without help, he took out a ball of rupees and thrust them into the breast pocket of the boy’s shirt. No refusal this time. He saw the group of young boys standing at the corner and smiled. He guessed that Surbjit could not be seen turning money away.

He also saw the two men, standing in the tree shade, watching them as they approached the hotel. Smart, western clothes, dark glasses. Pair of heavies. They turned away, aware of his eyes on them. At least some of his old instincts remained. Not dead yet.

*

He was in his chair, drifting in and out of sleep. The empty glass had long since fallen amongst the barely eaten room service meal of *Valache Birde*. The combination of alcohol and tablets had killed his appetite and deadened the pain in his right hand. It was dark outside, but his thoughts were full of the swirling colours of the market place. He'd been drawn back to that place. He sat upright, gritting his teeth against the stiffness, and allowed his mind to wander. Surbjit had bowed to him before running across the hotel forecourt, probably off to meet another customer. Hell of a survivor that boy. Bit like him.

He did not hear the first knock as his eyes began to close again, but he heard the second. Surbjit? The walk to the door racked his limbs. Little bugger must think he's a bloody meal ticket. Then he was looking into two faces it took him a while to recognise. Those sunglasses, glinting in the light from the room, gave the game away.

"Namaste."

*

He could feel their eyes burning into his back. Now and again there was the sharp nudge of the gun's barrel between his shoulder blades as he was pushed towards the darkness. How the hell had they got him out of the hotel so easily? Why hadn't he called for help?

This scene had been coming towards him over the long years, in his dreams and in his waking hours. He was almost relieved. Several times he was on the point of turning to face the two followers so that he could tell them that this could all finish now, end with dignity. But each time he stopped a hissed voice and a push would drive him on. They passed quickly through the small pool of light cast down by the single house lamp and entered the dark area of the alley. No-one would choose to hear in this place. The receptionist and the gate attendant had turned away when the two men had conducted their guest from the hotel. Safer that way.

"Now turn!" The voice was clipped and harsh.

He turned, expecting to see the shadowed features of two men. It would be good to look into their faces, but it was too dark to see them. A small light, maybe a torch or a phone, turned the faceless men into silhouettes. That was more like it. He could face Death more easily now.

A movement in the darkness made him look to his left and, somehow, he knew that the others were looking too. Years ago this would have been the second for his escape. Too late. A cluster of shadows appeared to become solid before beginning to move past the group towards the alley entrance. The figure was hunched, whimpering; it threw itself back against the wall as the light picked it out. A beggar - crawling, pleading, strange noises coming from the deformed and empty mouth. He watched, disconnected and disbelieving. A gun clicked in the dark.

“Ruko!” hissed an urgent, distorted voice. “He can’t see or speak. You want to bring bad luck on us all. Anyway, I know this place ...”

“Get on with it!” said the other man.

English. They spoke English.

There was anger then, more anger than he had felt for years, as he started to move towards the two men. Their quick breaths were close.

“Wait, you old fool ...!”

That was the last word... “Fool!”

Chapter Four. Sanjay.

He looked down at the body and sighed. The old man could have been asleep, he looked so peaceful. There had been so many corpses this week – in the river, in the gutter, in the houses - but this was the first European. Tomorrow this story, the murder of a visitor to Magphur, would fill the newspapers so that the death could not become just another statistic. Those running Magphur would demand an enquiry and he would have to give them answers.

This man had been killed quietly. People around here would like the story of the death to remain silent too, unrepeatable. No-one wanted to know. No faces looked out from any of the surrounding windows. Gathering information from witnesses? How often did that happen? Dumb acceptance always slowed his work. He pulled his gaze away from the dark, dried blood and ran his right hand across his face. Already the sweat was dampening his uniform and it wasn't just the first of the heat. Not much sleep last night. The dream had forewarned him of another bad day and only Seema's voice had got him through. He braced himself to begin his examination of the body. The investigation had begun.

He was thirty-two but, at this moment, felt twice as old. The pride at gaining promotion in Magphur, his home, disappeared in these moments. He looked around as the grey light of dawn began to show the scene. The low, flat roofed houses, the hidden alleyways. Riju Road, the place of the wild, whooping runs of his youth and of mad, staring eyes as his gang threatened stall holders. They beat, they stole. His other life. The past. Difficult to escape it standing here. Just a few streets away, Mansoor and he had ...

Later, there'd been running of a different kind – the hundred meters, the relays, the obstacle courses alongside the masses of young men trying for the Indian Police Force. Training. He'd come top of his group, skills sharpened on the Magphur streets. There had been smiles, approval, freedom. But victims too, losers who couldn't keep up. Not him though. The journey from street boy to policeman had ended. Now he was looking at a corpse again in the place where it all started.

Gupta's movement jerked him back to the moment. As the sergeant came to stand beside him he composed himself and tried to focus again on the body. He went down on one knee for a closer look. This was always difficult, he made his face impassive under Gupta's gaze.

The dead man looked peaceful as he lay on his back with the glassy, sightless eyes fixed on the sky. The pale face, with its slightly open, almost smiling mouth, looked oddly alive as though the end had come suddenly, in the middle of words. The congealed circle of blood in the middle of the dead man's forehead looked ordinary, almost like a jagged bhindi. Swift, silent death. A killer who knew his trade. His eyes wandered down the length of the corpse. The arms were spread wide and the legs too were spaced apart as though the dead man had been stretched so that his clothes could be searched more easily. He ran his eyes along the white, crumpled suit with the blue handkerchief in the breast pocket. The scuffed brown brogues were worn and down at heel. The clothes were old fashioned and this would have made the man more noticeable on the tourist trail in Magphur. No sandals, shorts or bright shirt. This steady examination of death calmed him. It was his work. A robbery which had gone wrong or a murder for its own sake? There were people in Magphur who killed for the hell of it, to prove themselves. He knew this. Gupta's voice stopped his thoughts.

"Captain, there's a witness."

Gupta's dead voice irritated him. A witness, here? Unheard of, usually. Alert, he turned and spoke clearly, "Where? I must speak with him now!" Gupta needed waking up.

"It's Mushtak the beggar, sah. No eyes or tongue. No-one else."

He cursed. Why were beggars often the only witnesses? Perhaps because there were so many of them. They were only reliable when there was money to be had. Still, Mushtak could have heard something last night. Worth a try. Something might be locked away in that muddled brain.

He walked swiftly with Gupta, round the corner to the shelter, no more than a small, propped up shed. The old beggar was squatting in there, against the wall, milky eyes and lined face turned to the sound of

their steps. This man had been old for a lifetime. Many years ago he and Mansoor had been afraid that the grasping, claw like hands would drag them into the shadows. Crouching low, he winced as the beggar's hot breath brushed across his face.

"Mushtak," he said gently. "It's Captain Sharma. Sanjay."

There was a nod from the beggar...then nothing.

"Mushtak," said Sanjay once more. "Was it the young ones? The gangs? Help me. Give me a sign."

The old man's body stiffened as though sensing the danger in the question. Killers could always return and kill again. The old dung lizard wasn't safe just because he was broken. Time was slipping away. Within minutes he could be called to another incident and any investigation into the tourist's murder would be held up by a jungle of paperwork. Only death ended things in this place. The questions, the form filling, the searching, even his dreams, all went on and on. There was no closure, anywhere.

The ringing phone cut through his anger. Mushtak flinched at the sound. The old beggar must have heard something last night. Gupta turned aside to answer and he braced himself for the routine questions. There would be another crime scene, maybe just like this one. The words held no surprise.

"Captain Sharma, there's been another death. We must go. I'll phone for two officers to ... clear this away."

Gupta gestured carelessly in the direction of the body. A routine matter of clearing the streets would follow, after the correct form was filled. Again the case would disappear amongst a mass of files whilst those behind desks pressed for results. As his anger boiled, he moved towards Mushtak. The beggar thrust himself back against the crumbling wall, writhing with fear. Good. He crouched, thrusting his hands into the filthy rags which covered the crooked bones, closing his ears and his mind to the strangled, half formed sounds. This was a nightmare, but he was used to that. His fists forced the beggar into a kind of tense stillness which helped him to search. Out of the corner of his eye, as he worked, he could see Gupta staring.

What would he do? Report police brutality or help by kicking a kind of nodding confession out of Mushtak? Difficult to tell with Gupta.

He rose above the grey rags and the reaching, greedy hands. The flames were still in him and he was tempted to go after the beggar as he skittered away on all fours like a rat escaping a flood. Breathing hard, he looked at the thing which he had pulled from Mushtak's grasp. A wallet. So, this had been taken from the dead man by the old scavenger. A small step forward in this new case. He turned towards Gupta, aware that his mask of self-control had slipped, and tried to lighten the mood with a smile.

"Well, sergeant," he said lightly, "Mushtak's been very helpful."

Gupta's answer was to stare into his face as though trying to read his mind. An uncomfortable feeling. He tried to concentrate on the wallet, his thoughts fluttering. Finally, his mind cleared. The murderers weren't thieves. Or had they been disturbed, prevented from completing their task in some way? At what point had Mushtak arrived on the scene? He looked inside the wallet. Money, credit cards ... a hotel key card. Most importantly, a name: Ralph Thomas. This was hope. The crest was clear on the card. The Park Hotel, Magphur. Ignoring Gupta's expression, he gave his orders briskly.

Soon the police support vehicle crunched to a halt nearby. He closed his ears to Mushtak's desperate, gurgling protests as two young policemen pushed him into the car before speeding off towards the Magphur cells. The beggar was in deep trouble and he could only imagine the dark terror in his head. At least there would be food behind bars.

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The foyer of The Park Hotel. Gupta was slumped into one of the cushioned chairs and he motioned for the sergeant to stand. The plush furnishings were of a past time and the quiet surroundings calmed him. He still shuddered at the memory of handling Mushtak. It was different away from the streets. This place called for a professional approach.

The desk receptionist was wary, glancing from side to side, clearly uncomfortable with uniformed policemen. People in the entrance area watched. Yes, Mister Ralph Thomas was indeed a guest here. The polite, firm request to search the guest's room made the man flinch. Policemen in view would be bad for the hotel's business. Then he saw the boy standing by the drinking fountain watching a group of newly arrived tourists, the camera case dangling over his back. The receptionist followed his gaze.

"The boy is waiting for Mr Thomas also. He has been working as the client's guide and says he has brought him his camera. Do you wish to speak to Mr Shastri, our manager? I can provide you with a quiet room, away from our guests."

He looked again at the boy and recognised himself. Something about the youngster took him back to his own schemes for making money from visitors. He had used his smile well ... even when he ran with the gang. Now he looked straight into the boy's face and saw his gaze returned. There was understanding.

The boy's eyes clearly admired his immaculate uniform with its polished buttons. This made him proud for appearance was everything. He saw a boy of about fourteen who looked sharp and alert. The shock of black hair hung over the forehead and almost covered the right eye. The loose fitting clothes were off-white and grimy but they'd been washed many times. The boy had also thought carefully about his look; he was ragged enough to gain sympathy, if needed, but smart enough for tourists not to reject him as a guide. Clever. Yes, there was a story behind the outward show, a story full of quick thoughts and narrow escapes. The youngster had seen trouble and had been troubled. Fate would decide which path he would choose. He'd need life to bring him good luck.

"Gupta, make sure that boy doesn't leave the hotel. I must speak to him later."

The lift doors closed behind him. The boy hadn't sold the camera. Must be after the old man's reward.

His eyes swept across the third-floor room before beginning to probe for detail. A half empty bottle of Scotch stood on the window sill, a tumbler lay overturned beside it. The armchair had been moved to face the tall window so that the person sitting there could look out over the city as he worked his way through the

whisky. The old man had spent his last few hours getting quietly drunk. What had been going through his mind during that time? Had he expected death? Too early for such questions. He forced himself to think of the facts of this place as he walked around the room. The manager, Shastri, appeared to speak tensely to the receptionist by the door before sending the poor man back to his desk.

The room was probably the same as the hundreds of other hotel rooms in Magphur and he found these places cold and impersonal, never as comfortable as they first seemed. He tried to imagine staying in a place like this – something he'd never done. The table to the right of the fitted wardrobe door was narrow; there was just room for the brown leather suitcase to rest on the surface. Shirts, ties, underwear and the wire of an electric shaver spilled out of the open top. Mr Thomas had not bothered to unpack properly. He had not placed any of his belongings in the wardrobe or in the cramped bathroom; he had simply rummaged for his pyjamas and thrown these on to the bed. The bed itself was crumpled, but it did not look as if the old man had slept beneath the covers. He had clearly been restless during his final hours. The only sound came from the whirring overhead fan. The manager watched him as though waiting for him to speak. Now for some authority.

“Your hotel is now closed for business, Mr Shastri. Not for long I hope. Admit no more guests. Other hotels will be found. This room must be locked until more officers arrive to examine it.” The manager was sweating, starting to speak, but there could be no wasted time. “Sir, your guests must remain in their rooms until I have questioned each of them. I will arrange for interviews to take place as soon as possible so that you are not inconvenienced for too long. My apologies, but these steps are necessary.”

The manager began to protest. “But ... we have many bookings... this is our busy time...”

“And this is a murder enquiry,” he snapped. “One which I want solved quickly.”

He walked into the corridor and watched the manager lock the door of the hotel room, waiting until the man was facing him.

“Sah, I require an office where I can conduct interviews. Please arrange this.”

Turning, he found himself looking down into the cold, grey eyes of an old woman. She leaned heavily on a walking stick in her left hand. With her other hand she fanned herself with a newspaper. The loose fitting grey dress and the black slippers showed that she had tried to make herself as comfortable as possible in the heat. She had not succeeded for there were beads of sweat on her forehead and above her top lip. She rocked slightly, forwards and backwards, as though fighting to maintain her balance, but the gaze remained steady. He felt as though he was being examined thoroughly. Speech cost her some effort, the voice crackled and quavered, but each word was clear.

“I’ve been ringing for room service for the last twenty minutes. Is there no-one on duty in this place?”

“I am so sorry, ma’am,” said the manager, stepping forward. “As you see, I have been very occupied. I will speak to the desk staff. How may I help?”

“I need some fresh, drinkable water,” said the old lady sharply. “I’m seriously flagging in this damned heat. This wretched hotel is *supposed* to have air conditioning. It’s what I’m paying for, I believe.”

“Yes, Miss Seebold, ma’am, I will see that fresh water is brought to your room.” Shastri bowed slightly and walked to the far end of the corridor speaking urgently into his mobile.

He watched the manager as he moved away, feeling a tinge of sorrow for the man. The old lady was quite a force. The grey eyes, and the dry voice, once more drew his gaze.

“Rather a strong police presence tonight. Are we to be murdered in our beds?”

“No, ma’am, you are quite safe, I assure you,” he said. “But there has been a death which we must investigate. I’m afraid that you must stay in the hotel until I ask you some routine questions later ...”

“It’s the old man, I take it.” Her interruption was sharp.

He bowed his head in assent, he would say no more. As though knowing this, Miss Seebold turned and walked away, her face was expressionless, like a mask. The interview with this lady would be interesting.

But first he would arrange for Ralph Thomas's room to be carefully examined. The investigation must begin properly. A guest list would be needed. Gupta would see to that whilst he arranged for the body to be identified. It would be quicker to get the boy to look at the dead man. Any next of kin could be found and told later. Anyway, seeing the body might get Surbjit to remember something important.

As the lift doors opened he noticed that Gupta had taken the camera case from the boy. Good. Any photographs could tell them a great deal.

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The morning wore on, He looked down at the boy who sat beside him with his head bowed. On either side the white hospital corridor stretched away. The mortuary was through the double doors. He hated this place. Surbjit sat still, watching and listening, swinging his legs, restless. The smile had gradually worn away as they had spoken at the hotel and during the drive here – Magphur's busy time - and now it had gone completely. Questions still needed to be asked. They were alone in this empty corridor and distant working sounds echoed against the cracked walls. This wasn't really an identification. Travel documents or, better still, any of the dead man's family they could find would do that. No, the sight of the corpse might jog Surbjit's memory.

"Surbjit, you've told me all you can remember about the bus passengers. Tell me again about the old man. Don't worry if you've told me the same things already."

He thought quickly about the facts which Surbjit had given him back at the hotel and during their drive. Ralph Thomas, had been quiet, watchful, sometimes listening, sometimes not. Twice Surbjit had reminded his client to pick up his camera case. In the end he had carried it for him, walked off with it by mistake. The boy spoke, suddenly, his voice hollow in the cool emptiness.

"He wanted to see the old part of the town, but he'd been there before...a long time ago. He gave me five hundred rupees. Kept looking around as if he expected to see someone he knew."

And a camera. An old but expensive type, just forgotten. The boy had brought it to the hotel! It could have been sold in the market place. He looked like he needed money. The mortuary assistant was standing before them. More questions later.

“Sah. This way please.”

He led Surbjit down a short corridor, watching him closely. At Surbjit’s age he’d seen many bodies. Death had been part of his life then and it still was. Strange, that this place always made him uneasy, even with his background. A place like this could be part of a nightmare. He might even end up here himself ... Surbjit had spoken firmly when he had agreed to see Ralph’s body and this strength had been welcome. Now he was almost glad that the boy was with him. There seemed to be a type of innocence, maybe even goodness, which had so far remained untouched in Surbjit. He’d lost such a simple view years ago.

Together, they looked down at Ralph’s tight, lined features. With a nod, the boy walked out of the room quickly, not looking back. No need to follow for the job was done. A picture of Ralph Thomas’s final hours was forming in his mind. Gupta would find the boy for more questions tomorrow.

He walked out of the hospital and back into the busy street, looking around before turning towards home. Surbjit had vanished into the crowd.

Now it was time to speak with those people who had travelled with Ralph Thomas on Sashi’s bus.

Chapter Five. Rhiannon.

She looked out of her hotel room window at the white police car parked below. The khaki-clad police constable walked slowly backwards and forwards in front of the closed gates of the hotel entrance. No-one was going in or out. The guests were prisoners until the police were satisfied with the answers to their questions. The old man was dead. A policeman had told them last night when they returned to the hotel. Bloody typical. Trouble always followed Raj, even to this steaming mess of a place. She'd been excited at first. A honeymoon. But those people they'd met, those hurried conversations which she didn't understand, showed her that this was a time for Raj's business deals. He'd been restless in the night and, as he mumbled strange words, her worries had grown.

She swept her hair from either side of her face and held it, left handed, behind her head. Quickly she formed the thick mass into a bun and held it with a band which she took from the back pocket of the white, linen trousers which Raj hated. There, that was a bit cooler. The sound of Raj stirring in his sleep made her turn towards the bed where he lay. He had finally become still as dawn was breaking, snoring lightly. She took two steps towards the double bed and looked down at him.

His relaxed features looked smooth and young, despite the dark stubble on his chin. This was more like the look which had caught her eye back in London. Their first meetings, his full attention, had given her confidence, made her love him straight away. Seeing a life together, she'd married him quickly, happy to give up everything, which wasn't much: her work in the department store selling cheap fashions and make up, nights out with the girls in deafening bars where eyes looked her up and down, the same view of the street every morning from her box bedroom window. Leaving school before exams had given her independence and new friends. Girls she'd laughed with on dark street corners were mates she could only just remember now. He'd called after her that rainy night, near the embankment and, amongst the giggles, they'd dared her to go to him. Would he have accepted any of the girls? A few steps towards him in the rain and a new life had begun.

With him, she laughed more than ever. His friends crowding around her at parties, their *ganja* laced breath, those breakneck journeys – always in a different car – to parts of London she'd never seen. Then there were his absences, too long, and the ways he would love her when he returned. Then, just after they'd moved in together, he'd come in one night covered in blood, swearing her to silence through cut lips. She'd mopped his damaged face as he cried on the bed.

She had wanted Raj then, still wanted the old Raj now. Marriage had made her happy for a while. Her parents' hard words and their refusal to come near spoiled nothing. Then, so sure that he was her life, he began to change. She remembered ... His eyes flickered open, his head turned away from the window. Still asleep. She stepped backwards, in fear.

His anger, his mood swings, she lived with these. Her right arm was still bruised. There were sobs, like a child's, when, afterwards, he knew how much he'd hurt her. When he was with his business associates or his friends, like the other night in that restaurant, there was no holding him. He was loud, in everyone's face, whilst she looked on as though waiting for his next order. She shuddered, thinking of the way those men had looked at her. When they were alone, she found she could silence him with a look or a few kind words and she contented herself with this. Love and fear mixed.

The street calls and car horns drifted into the room. Everything here was so different! So excited when they arrived, they laughed together. Now the whole bloody place was messing with her head. She stooped to kiss him for comfort. Her lips touched his cheek, his eyes snapped open. Had he been awake? A gasp escaped her. She stepped back as Raj thrust himself from the bed to pace the room. Now for the blind rage.

"They can't do this! They can't fucking do this! Who the hell do these bastards think they are? We got our rights, ain't we? They can't lock us up with no reason!"

"We're not locked up, love. We just can't leave the hotel until we're questioned. It won't be long." She made her voice low and even, watching him. She dug her nails into her palms and hoped that the mood

would go away. His eyes flicked everywhere as he moved. She made herself sit on the edge of the bed, her back to him, and waited for the next words.

“Look, I’ve got to get out of here for a bit. I’m going down to the reception area. See if I can find out what’s happening. I’ll get some answers ...”

The door slammed behind her and then she was alone. It was her turn to fall back on the bed, glad of the peace. Her mind drifted back over the last three days, her first experience of India: the burst of heat which had hit her on arrival at Delhi Airport, the colours, the smells and the long train journey. Raj had argued with that family in the carriage, waved the tickets, until the father and mother had moved to make way for them. The children had looked at Raj, wide-eyed and scared, the little one had cried. Later, Raj had been perfect, advising her which food to take from the trolley. Then there had been the endless bus journey through Magphur, that spaced out bus-driver watching her all the time. Christ! When he grabbed Raj by the throat! The memory of this closed her eyes. But then other thoughts crowded in.

There was the restaurant where they had spent the last two nights meeting some of Raj’s business friends. It had been horrible being ignored by everyone – the men, their wives and also by her husband. Okay, he had important matters to attend to, but why did he have to pose so much? What did he have to prove? Last night had been better, at least the other diners smiled at her now and again. But then Rajid and two other men had gone off for two hours. She’d turned to him and he’d gone! Those women looked sorry for her so she’d given them the hard stare, crying inside. Yeah, he’d charmed her when he came back but, behind the shining eyes, she could see his fear. The few hours grabbed sleep in the hotel room had been the best part. Then the police had arrived. Now they were stuck. The tall police officer, the one in charge, had told them that the wait would not be long.

The sickening worry always came when she was alone. The same doubts. The ones that always came when he was away. Was she worried that Rajid would return or was she fearful that he might not come back? If only she knew what he was doing. God, she was so bloody tired! Before drifting into sleep, she

caught sight of her reflection in the gold blade of the slowly revolving ceiling fan. Her hair had come loose again and it lay around her head, spread out on the bed like a red pool.

*

She shuddered awake as he touched her, her senses gathering. He was bending over her with his hands, like manacles, gripping her wrists. His lips were on hers, kissing her gently. He enjoyed this power. She kissed him back, closing her eyes again. His whisper was sharp and insistent.

“Rhi, if you get asked about last night – you know, in the restaurant – I was with you all the time. Right?”

She forced herself to ask the question, eyes still closed, “Where were you last night, Raj? I got worried.”

His hot breath quickened, scaring her. Then his hands tightened around her wrists so that she gasped.

“No need to ask questions, babe. Just do it for me. Yeah? Business, right.”

“Raj, I’m frightened ...”

She saw his mood change. His grip loosened and he moved to lay beside her. Then he held her tightly in his arms, so that her head was on his chest, his heart beating fast. His voice surprised her as it trembled, there was no anger.

“I tell you what girl, I’m bloody well scared too. But, listen, the trick is not to show it ...ever.”

They lay together for a while before the quiet was spoiled by the ringing of the room’s telephone. Raj rolled smartly off the bed and moved to pick up. He listened, his face still, before putting the phone down. When he spoke he looked straight at her.

“The police are gonna start questioning us. Remember what I said. Right, Rhi?”

He looked at her and, in that moment, she knew that she could lie for him.

Chapter Six. Sanjay.

Evening. He drove away from Gupta's home, back through central Magphur, weaving the white Toyota through the hooting mass of cars. He had dropped Gupta off at the door of his flat and watched how the sergeant's youngest son had run to meet his father before being picked up and carried into the house. Work was over for the day and he imagined Gupta slumped into a chair. His colleague's career was trickling away to nothing and sometimes it looked as if he'd stopped caring. It must have hurt when control of the Magphur station was taken away from him. The flashes of resentment in Gupta's eyes showed this. But there was also the wisdom which sometimes rumbled from him – straight to the point. It was difficult to imagine working with anyone else. Nevertheless, Gupta needed watching.

The long day had exhausted him. Another death, another case to add to his growing list. The murder of a European visitor was bad for the city's new image, he would be told, and the killers should be found quickly. No chance of switching off like Gupta. Policing in Magphur was like being alone in a raging storm. Surviving on his wits was a skill he'd learned when he was a boy and he'd need that street instinct with this case.

Yes, his beginnings in Magphur had taught him well. So had his police training in Mumbai. Without doubt he was a big city boy. There'd been no questions about his past then as he'd stood with hundreds of other recruits, trained with them and beaten them. He'd risen above all those gazetted graduates. The pride of this would never leave him. But he'd been lucky too! Commissioner Gopal had treated him well.

The cluster of traffic stopped him. The level crossing was down again causing a pushing, weaving chaos. Faces stared through the car window at his uniform. Some people may have known him but no-one smiled. Staring straight ahead, he replayed the day's interviews, losing himself in his thoughts.

Questioning Sashi, someone so familiar, had felt unreal. Starting with Patel might have been a better move. He looked jumpy enough to catch off guard. Or perhaps the young wife or the old woman, Doris. There was a lifetime mapped out on that face. Those eyes saw everything, he was sure. Too much thinking.

He needed to clear his head, take a break before running through those conversations once more. Rolling down his window, he smelt the night. Traffic fumes, cooking and body odour. So many changes in the city, yet in many ways Magphur remained the same. The temple lights glowed across the car roofs as they had done since he was a boy dodging the traffic, always on the move. Like that smiling Surbjit. He rolled up his window again, closing out the memories.

In the end, he liked his decision to interview Sash first. The boy had been wide eyed, anxious to please and glad to forget his own troubles for a time. The young man's business worries were dragging at him, and the sweet smell of dope was on his breath. All that could be dealt with later.

The manager's office, well-ordered and clean, had been a good place to start the investigation. The little sweating man had wanted to hide away any scandal, offering him the baggage room, but he had waved this away, demanding better – a more respectful place to piece together a man's last hours. Anger burned him, even now at the day's end, and he took the helpful deep breaths. Ralph Thomas's death was an inconvenience for some people. Yes, it had been right to start with Sash. It was difficult to be aggressive with someone so familiar and this had given him time to relax, to collect his thoughts. Getting his mind right took longer these days. The first interview had helped him to stop thinking about the shouting, the blows, when he had faced Mushtak the beggar. Releasing his grip on the wheel, flexing his sweating hands, he closed his eyes, his mind searching, sifting for something, anything, which would lead him to a murderer.

Sash had come in smiling, at ease. He had given his thoughts on each of his passengers, speaking clearly: Doris's watchful silence, Rajid's challenging stare, Rhiannon's sidelong glances at her husband and Ralph Thomas's gaze, unmoving yet full of pain. A driver's observation. Sashi's brains hadn't quite turned to mush yet. He'd watched "the red haired lady" so closely - the way she watched her partner's every mood and need. Then came the argument over the missing wallet. Sashi's arms had waved, his eyes wide, as he told of the sudden change in Rajid Patel. A clear image of a spitting, snarling man. Yes, a good beginning.

All this was now in his memory and the scribbled reminders were in his notepad to be looked over later. One part of the first interview stood out. On his way to the office door, when the questioning was over, Sashi had turned and thought before speaking, his voice quiet, fearful.

“I’ve seen him before. Patel....I know his face.”

“From where?”

“On the street. In Magphur... He was with one of the gangs. I saw them standing, talking – before I went the other way.”

“When was this?”

“Lots of times. And I’m sure I’ve seen him before, many months ago ... with the gang again.”

Sashi was braver than some, he spoke more freely. There were never many details whenever the gangs were mentioned. Always there was blind terror, these days more than ever. Maybe the stuff Sashi was taking had loosened his tongue.

“You remember how, almost a year ago, those men threatened to turn my bus over, to burn it. They wanted money... I couldn’t pay. You helped me...”

Yes, he’d helped months ago, with some success. Sash had come to him, pleading for protection. Again, a brave move. There had been arrests of one or two gang members, the warnings. Gupta had been great then, standing alongside him like a threat. Sash had been allowed to park the bus outside the police station where it could be watched. The gangs had backed off and the bus continued its runs around Magphur. He hoped that Sash wouldn’t mess up this second chance. So, Rajid Patel mixed with that crowd...

Patel had come next.

A thump on the side of his car jerked him out of his thoughts. A motorcyclist, with three very young passengers, was pushing his way past the policeman's vehicle. Engines revved up everywhere as the mass began to move towards the opening level crossing. Rush hour Magphur.

Soon he was travelling over the new flyover. The Dimpal Highway in the modern part of the city. Magphur's new face. The flat roofs of the shanty town which had once occupied this whole area had gone. Streets where he had played were now beneath half built office blocks, divided by disjointed building sites. Soon the concrete and the glass of a different Magphur would be everywhere. Plans told of a shining airport which would be many tourists' first sight of the new India. Excitement. New opportunities. He smiled to himself. Not so easy to cover up the past. Mansoor had a big office in the city these days, so an informer had told him, but he knew for sure such a man couldn't change. The car left the tarmac and the journey continued over rough roads which would soon be smooth. The square buildings, the change, creeping into old Magphur like the fingers of a claw, had not touched this area yet. But such thoughts weren't helping the case.

Rajid came into his mind. That sly, dog face had started so loud and confident, like a businessman anxious to sell. Squashing his dislike, he saw that this was someone who could succeed in the new Magphur. Well, time would tell. Those first words had made him uneasy.

"C'mon, man. You're keeping me from my bride, know what I mean!"

The voice, the style of English, was harsh on his ears. He'd thought about calling in Gupta. A second opinion on what was being said. Rajid Patel was a different type of suspect. Suspect? Not too fast. He didn't like the man and it wasn't just those words which gave him this feeling. His mind flicked back over their encounter.

He'd begun in Punjabi.

"Namaste."

The reply was slow to come.

“Kirpa karke hauli-hauli bolo...”

Rajid Patel was asking him to speak slowly. First impression ... not a natural Punjabi speaker. He could survive here with a few learned phrases, in the market place or in a restaurant, on the street where Sash had seen him, but he was British. Or was he really so ignorant of the language? He'd turned to English.

“Is this your first visit to India, Mr Patel?”

If Rajid Patel had been surprised by the correctness of his speech, he didn't show it. He answered quickly, skipping over any real meaning. The man was never still, always on the edge of control.

“Nah, I'm always calling in for whatever reason...family visit...business...pleasure. This is the place to be. The future, init. Now it's honeymoon time.”

He smiled grimly now at the way in which Rajid Patel had kept referring to the honeymoon using words which made it clear that he was mixing a small amount of business with large helpings of pleasure. The noisy friendliness had been a clumsy attempt to soften the questions, to make himself liked. Sickening! There was much to check in Patel's background. He swerved to avoid a handcart, drove towards an open area of road before it could become clogged with traffic, and replayed the words once more.

“What is your business, Mr Patel?”

“Oh, you know, man, this and that... I buy authentic articles from the market. There's a real demand for that kind of stuff in England. I mean it's a living. Yeah?”

There'd be some local language needed for such business.

“And who are your friends and family in Magphur? Who do you meet? Please give me names of your business associates.”

Patel had laughed at his quick demands and then replied with many names of family and of traders. These names were all in the notebook now – people working in small shops, stalls and offices. Tracing these would provide work for Gupta.

“Can you tell me all your movements last night, Mr Patel?”

Had the smile flickered, the open gaze hardened for a second? He wanted to think so, but couldn't be sure. The reply, spoken through a relaxed grin, had been friendly.

“Mate, I met up with loads of cousins for a meal and a natter. At the The Palitana. We were there all evening. You know, *cleanliness and freshness are foremost in our minds*. Want me to go through the menu, the list of people I was with? There were loads of us – having a great time.”

“It won't be necessary to give me a list now, Mr Patel, although I may return to the point later.”

Rajid Patel had been vague about the “old geezer” on the coach who'd spent his time “lookin' bleedin' miserable.” The interview had ended soon after.

“Time for the wife.” This had been accompanied by an extravagant wink. Patel was from the sewer!

“Quite so... Would you be kind enough to ask your wife to enter for questioning? I apologise now for disrupting your evening. But I'm afraid that I will be speaking with Mrs Patel for some time.”

Rajid Patel had turned away, his act vanishing as he moved. Too sure of himself. But mention of the wife had broken his smile. Yes, that had worked well.

He'd seen Patel's face change, watched the eyes flicker as he turned.

“No point, mate, she can't tell you nothing.”

“Nevertheless, I must continue to ask questions and Mrs Patel was on the coach.”

He had watched, with satisfaction, as Patel's mouth opened to protest. The hard gaze which he used during interrogations stopped more words. Patel's expression said that a very different meeting would come soon.

If Rajid Patel's appearance and approach had caused him anger, then the sight of Rhiannon led to sympathy. Her head was bowed and the red hair covered one side of her face. An unfamiliar style to him. He'd changed the tone as he enquired after the young woman's comfort, her impressions of India. Difficult not to speak softly when she was struggling to control her fear. Had her husband spoken to her, threatened her, just before he entered the room? He cursed himself for not sending for Gupta from the corridor to check whether Patel had gone straight back to the hotel room. It had been difficult, at first sight, to make out the personality described by Sashi, the woman who had soothed her husband's anger by the bus. He felt, as she sat down opposite him, that any questions about Rajid would clearly only lead to distress and this wasn't needed. Nevertheless, he regretted, as he picked his way through the traffic, starting the questioning so gently. She could know more than she showed.

"What were your impressions of Mr Thomas, Mrs Patel?"

Rhiannon Patel had lifted her head for the first time and looked straight into his face; someone else surprised that he spoke English so well. She'd paused, as though weighing up his character, deciding something before speaking. Her voice had been quiet at first, but then it grew. Maybe she only ever spoke to her husband.

"He looked like any other tourist, really. Bit old fashioned, lifted his hat to me a couple of times during the journey. Helped me with my bag when we got on the bus. Real gentleman."

"Did he speak to anyone?"

"He was very good at speaking to anyone Indian. Knew the language, like he'd spent a long time here. Maybe years ago ... I don't know."

Bit by bit. Things were becoming clearer as he turned thoughts and impressions over in his mind.

“Where were you last night, Mrs Patel?”

“With my husband, all night. We were eating with his family and friends. At The Palitana. The waiters will remember our group. We gave loads of tips.” She had smiled, more relaxed than before. She was tougher than she looked.

“You say that you were with Mr Patel all night. You never lost sight of each other, even for a while?” He fixed the woman with the stare, but she did not waver.

“That’s what I said,” she was almost indignant. “We’ve only been married a few weeks, you know.”

It would take time to unravel the Patels’ story. This might have to be done in the less comfortable surroundings of the police station.

Then came the second meeting with the old woman. Her manner and her bearing had been exactly the same as when he had met her outside Ralph Thomas’s room. As she entered the office, Doris’s grey, unchanging expression had promised little. However, her reply to the question about her impressions of the murder victim had made him sit up.

“He was coming home to die, you know.”

“How do you know?”

“Had that look about him. I know it well. Anyway, I’m doing something similar myself...although your country isn’t my home. Far from it.”

“I am so sorry, ma’am. The journey must have been very tiring for you.” Kind words he’d thought.

Doris Seebold's unflinching gaze told him that she had no time for sympathy. Her voice took on a harsh edge. "I'm simply travelling, viewing the world, before it's too late. Magphur is a place which I hope to quickly leave behind."

As he accelerated, sounding his horn to overtake a lorry, he thought of Doris's control. The hint of anger in her voice had moved the interview into the area where she'd wanted it to be.

"Please don't ask me about my impressions of places or of people, Captain. I can only give you facts. Make of them what you will."

Doris had described Ralph in some detail: his crumpled white suit, the Panama hat, his pale face. She could have been describing a piece of furniture. Then she became weary, would say no more and so he had allowed her to go to her room. She refused his offer of assistance.

He turned the car out of the main stream of traffic and drove slowly down a side street which was little more than an alleyway, only wide enough for one car. The street opened out into a small square. This was the place. The headlights picked out peeling walls and boarded windows. All ready for the demolition workers. Turning the Toyota around, he pointed it back up the narrow street which he had just come down. He would need to get away quickly afterwards... as quickly as possible. He switched off the engine and the headlights. No other lights anywhere. The traffic noises seemed distant. Getting out of the car, he pulled on the shabby brown jacket which had lain ready on the seat beside him. This would hide his policeman's shirt from any watchers who could be in the darkness as Mushtak had been.

"Sanjay, my friend, your timing's as good as ever."

The voice had come from somewhere behind him. Just the same, always the same. This meeting must end quickly. He turned to face the sound.

"Jagdish. Give me your information quickly. It's late." It was a relief to be speaking his own language again.

“Be patient, Sanjay. You know I won’t be rushed.”

His eyes began to see shapes. A grey form stood before him, so close that the hot stink of breath made him turn his head slightly. Jagdish, a figure from the past. The voice still carried a threat.

“Sanjay, you’ve not changed. Always in a hurry. Not so long since we ran these streets together, eh! Remember when we robbed that old man and left him lying by his car. Mansoor wanted to steal the car, to sell it, but we argued too long about who should drive and the police chased us away.” The laugh made him close his eyes. “Show me your uniform, Sanjay. It amuses me. I’ve got a light to shine on those buttons.”

Keep to business, don’t get involved in a battle of words.

“Jag! Only one question. What’s Mansoor doing now? He’s gone quiet and I need to know.”

“My friend, you know I don’t work with Mansoor any more. He’s become much too important now in his fine, new office...mixing with important people. I still work the streets, just like you ...”

“But the streets are full of information. What do you know?”

There was a pause, time for thought. He wanted to be home, now. Then the words came quickly.

“Mansoor has asked some people who are known to me to find out about newcomers to Magphur. He’s had people working at the airport, checking the tourist lists. He’s after someone.” The voice stopped suddenly, but he could still hear Jagdish’s heavy breath. He waited, listening for any sound in the darkness, there was nothing.

“Who’s he looking for? Why?”

He sensed Jagdish moving away. “I know nothing else, Sanjay. You must find the rest yourself. You’re the policeman, I’m the crook, remember. You want to know what Mansoor is doing, eh? That’s what you

always want. Now give me my money. Don't worry, I'll find out more and we'll meet again...somewhere else...soon."

This had gone on too long. He'd counted the money earlier. The roll, kept together by an elastic band, was fat in his pocket. He thrust it in front of him and felt the hard hand wrap around his wrist, holding him in place. The voice hissed and dripped.

"Remember, Sanjay, you will turn away, give me space, when you hear of my business dealings. We're old friends. We understand each other. In return, I'll give you pieces of Mansoor. Things you can use, eh?"

He pulled his arm away and moved back. One punch thrown in the direction of Jag's face would make him feel better but he kept his voice level. "I'll send for you soon. Stay out of trouble and find out what you can about Mansoor ... or anything else."

There was no reply. Jag had gone, leaving him alone. Quickly he returned to the car and looked at the clock. 8.30. He was late. Driving up the narrow road, he tried to gather his thoughts, to become a policeman, a family man, again. Informers were scum. They moved in the shadows, betraying, grasping money where they could. Many of his colleagues used them as a necessary part of the work in Magphur. Jag was an evil, treacherous bastard. How many policemen would have ignored his crimes in return for information? The answer would pain him.

The familiar, square shape of the block of flats loomed into view, silhouetted against a sky full of city lights. Pushing all thoughts of the interviews, of Jagdish, from his mind as he stepped out of the car, he prepared to move into the arms of his family, grateful for the rest to come.

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That night, after the house had fallen silent, he stood looking out at the darkness which enveloped the narrow street. The night sounds – the howling dogs, the hooting cars on the main road – had drawn him from his bed. So had his wish to avoid the nightmare. Keep thinking about the present. Avoid the past. Why was

Mansoor so interested in newcomers to Magphur? There was no rest. Mansoor was everywhere, joining past and present together.

Chapter 7. Gopal.

“Police Commissioner Ravi Gopal.” Seeing his name, engraved on the golden door plate, still gave him pleasure. He closed the door, he wouldn’t be disturbed now, and returned to the laptop on his desk, sighing heavily. The *Magphur Voice* web page showed the bleak headline: **ENGLISH TOURIST KILLER STILL AT LARGE**. The story of the death of Ralph Thomas, 69, made him curse.

“Haramjada!”

He apologised to the gods for this as any good Hindu should. The damned paper made it sound as if a maniac was killing English tourists all over Magphur. Those scaremongers working on that rag of a newspaper loved a crisis. Fear and cheap gossip sold copy. Breathing deeply, as Jas had taught him, he calmed himself. Only one man had so far been killed, one sickly old fool who, by all accounts, could easily have died in his bed at any time. No need for all this publicity and drama. What good would all this do Magphur? It needed hushing up. He would speak to the editor, rein in the media with some well placed rupees. Retirement was close and there must be order. Order? With such stories on the front pages? His legacy would be good. He deserved no less. Those fools who had sat here before him had left him too many unsolved cases, too many loose ends, too few people who could be trusted. He’d fought his way to this office, held on to a position that needed to be gripped now more than ever. A result was needed, soon. Sharma came into his mind.

His mind flicked nimbly over the last few months of ridding the old Magphur streets of scum. Powerful men had begun to show him good will because of his work preparing the city’s new face. Gambling on Sharma had been a chance worth taking. Young Sanjay. Laughing briefly, bitterly, he thought of how he had supported that boy, putting his hard earned position on the line. Arguing with those fools at headquarters had been painful, but he always performed well at meetings. Again and again he’d preached that Sharma’s energy and imagination would bring results quickly. All the positives had been driven home, he’d cleverly ridiculed the idea that here was a man who ducked and dived between the rules. After all, no-one knew the

ways of the Magphur streets like Sharma. For hadn't he risen from the city's dirt? Wasn't he an example of what could be achieved in the new Magphur? A university degree wasn't needed to clear the Magphur streets of crime. The campaign had succeeded. He'd given Sharma a special rank and tasked him with cleaning up Magphur.

How Sharma had gone to work with a will! Several of those vultures – pimps, thieves, murderers – had found their attempts to make a living from the new rich of Magphur swiftly blocked. It was satisfying to think back over those early successes: the bank robberies foiled by tipped off policemen lying in wait, the police patrols no longer afraid to go into the dark alleys, the beggars rounded up to spend nights in cells. None of this had been pretty, it had been brutal but effective and at times he had been satisfied.

Watching, watching Sharma all the time, encouraging whilst assessing, that had been the game: never asking about sources of information, never openly seeking details about the speedy confessions which Sanjay Sharma was somehow able to collect. The results were there for headquarters to see. Why shouldn't he accept the public praise for a job well done? He'd worked hard to put Sharma in place, hadn't he? The credit was his. Anyway, Sharma could be ditched as soon as he showed weakness. Yes, Magphur, old and new, had become a safer place even if the peace was fragile. The secret was to keep thinking, to keep one step ahead of any criticism. The offices and corridors outside his door weren't so different from the city corners where the gangs met. Rats devoured each other here too and only the most cunning would survive. Well, he was a survivor.

There were still too many crimes, too many murders, the figures and graphs produced by ministry men showed this, as did the newspapers, and Sharma was beginning to look tired and, yes, haunted. Oh, he showed energy and people respected him, but such things never lasted. You had to work hard at keeping up appearances, he knew. He could see beyond Sharma's immaculate uniform and smile. Too many men had crumbled to dust trying to tame Magphur. Not that slug Gupta, of course, he'd just sat on his fat arse and waited to be kicked. Demoting that one had been a good move. Was it time for another change? Not yet, not

before the murderer of the old Englishman had been caught. He'd been told that Sharma was becoming fixed on getting a result there. A good sign. Still, there was no harm in examining the captain's record again. There were examples of that gutter rat bending the rules. Such information would be helpful when applying what was called "disciplinary pressure." Ending the career of those no longer useful was a regrettable, but necessary, step. Distancing himself from any wrongdoing would be good for Magphur. Anyway, he couldn't wait long, success had to happen quickly. The Englishman's murder needed solving.

His office was tidy and organised, no blemishes allowed: the filing cabinets against the whitewashed walls with case details logged alphabetically within labelled drawers, the categorised information on the newly organised database, reports carefully worded to show that he had done his utmost to achieve results in the face of others' shortcomings. That was the way to leave a career, with nothing unexplained and with no-one speaking badly of him.

But then there were the cold crimes which refused to leave his memory. The Ralph Thomas murder could not become one of these. Sliding his laptop to one side, he pulled the familiar, fat folder towards him. Parts of this would be destroyed in his back garden, soon. Shred and burn. No-one would see him. Bit by bit the gathered dust of the past would be blown away. There were the yellowing newspaper clippings with their blurred black and white photographs. More unfinished stories from a time long before laptops, stories which he knew lived on in taunting street gossip.

Each case was an insult. Money stolen from the vault of the main Magphur Bank and never recovered, the kidnapping of the wealthy socialite Guha – her body had never been found. The burning of the local school. Years had passed, but there was always someone to mention it. He looked young in the picture, directing rescue operations, showing concern for the children. Thankfully no-one important had died, only one elderly cleaner. It could have been so much worse. The scene played through his mind again: the lines of screaming children running from the heat, the square shell of the crumbling school, his blistering skin as

he pulled the last child away. The parents had wept their gratitude. Their wealth and influence had allowed him to progress. The escaped arsonists became someone else's problem.

Then there had been the Magphur riots. Still he punished himself by remembering these even though, once again, he'd gained praise for his efforts.

The old newspaper cutting faced him like an accusation.

THIRTY-TWO PEOPLE DIE DURING NIGHT OF RIOTS.

The years fell away quickly, thirty six of them, to uncover a night full of burning torches, faces screaming hatred and fear, election banners used as weapons, gunfire, bodies lying in the streets. It had all started so well before campaigning had been forgotten and personal grudges remembered: the speeches, the cheers and the queues had moved from order to chaos. He saw again those faces in the crowd. To start with he'd returned their laughter, proud of his uniform. Later he ordered those same faces to be beaten back.

The death had started suddenly. The gunshots, fired into the air at first, were no more than celebration and high spirits. But the laughter had turned to howls when people began to fall. Darkness had brought the Night of the Magphur Riots. More deaths. Looting. Unsolved thefts. His eyes skimmed across words which were branded on his brain.

"...the worst night of violence in Magphur's history. Many people remain in hospital after the democratic process ended in violence and death. Buildings in the Parandasi area are still ablaze this morning and police continue to arrest looters. The worst damage occurred around the Sikh Temple from which many treasured artefacts were carried off. Cells are full..."

It was still with him, the stench of stale sweat in those crowded cells. There had been the wild chases in and out of the flames, people darting among the smoking ruins, arms full of valuables, the arrests and the house to house search for desperate scavengers. The disaster had been complete and the police had been laughed at. Of the many treasures carried off by the mob that night only a few had been recovered. The

Magphur Star had never been found. The newspaper text seemed to move before his eyes as he looked again into those faces in the jeering crowd. He had given the order to shoot. To protect Magphur. To save lives. He remained proud.

He could recall every one of the dozen men given to him to command, each one a hard-bitten scumbag, who had carried out their duties quickly and ruthlessly. They didn't care. They took their bonuses and were disbanded soon after the night. Arrests were made, *lathis* used savagely to beat confessions out of those who were merely witnesses to the looting. Triggers were squeezed without question. Sanda, his commanding officer, the type of evil old hog not around any more, had seen everything, or most of it, and was impressed.

After the riots, the Magphur politicians needed good reports and he could understand this. Stories were changed and eye-witnesses selected. Luck, or more probably Sanda's influence, made him the face in the papers and on the posters. A role model with the type of film star looks which Jas used to admire. The few protests were swiftly hushed. The commendations he'd received for his work in the riots still gave him pleasure; those pieces of paper, those medals, had set him on the road to success. What a wife Jaswinder was then as she showed these trophies at the dinner parties they held for influential guests! She'd taught him to protest modestly. Spreading the word where it mattered in Magphur remained Jas's strength.

The Magphur Star was another sore which refused to heal. A gift from Her Majesty's Government, kept under guard in the Sikh temple since the century's early days. Such a thing of value should have been kept in a bank! The gold base, the engraved stem topped with the star which held the green ruby at its centre. Something else which had never been found ...

He turned his attention back to his laptop. Two tasks today. One, to look yet again at the latest crime figures. Depressing reading, but there would be difficult questions soon and so there had to be reasoned arguments. Two, to look again at Sanjay Sharma's file. The captain's past was neatly arranged there. No harm in compiling evidence just in case people started to point accusing fingers. It was all about sidestepping blame after all.

Chapter Eight. Gupta.

He didn't like starting work too early. Lifting his arm from the bed, he looked at his watch and groaned. 7.30 a.m. People in the street below were stirring, preparing for the day in the time before the heat. Breakfast smells filled his nostrils. Sagari must be up. He turned to touch her warm, empty space. They had argued, quietly so as not to wake the boys, then he must have dozed at last during the moments when she had left him to prepare for her family's day. Moving stiffly to sit on the edge of the bed, he looked towards the chair where his uniform had been thrown. Time to get ready. Sharma would already be at his desk looking smart and sharp. The wrinkles in his own uniform were worse than ever. Sagari used to iron it.

He walked across the narrow corridor and stood at the door of the dining room. Sagari was sitting on the floor in the far corner, stirring. She didn't turn or get up to greet him. The boys walked, blinking, from the bedroom. Miral ran to him, reaching up to be lifted, laughing. That was better. Sunil and Kevdan, always so serious, made their way to the breakfast table to reach for food. They would wake up when they met their friends to play football before school began, then they would rush their way through the day.

Sagari moved across the room to place the tiffin box on the table near him, but he turned away not wanting to speak. She didn't deserve that, but he couldn't help himself. The hard, whispered words of the night before were too fresh in his mind. Still, something had to be said, or the boys would worry.

"Captain Sharma has given me an important job," he mumbled. "I'll get food later. I'll be on the move all day." Important job? To find the boy Surbjit and take him to the station was no more than an errand.

He saw Sagari toss the spoon on to the kitchen table in a gesture of distaste. Mentioning Sharma often did this to her. He lowered Miral to the floor and pushed his son gently away. Why did she have to choose this moment, when the boys were here? He held her gaze as she spoke, her quiet voice trembling.

"Amarjit, I've said how that man rules your life. You let him walk over you ... Why don't you ...?"

He raised his palm towards her, as though shutting away her voice and face, and she stopped. She wouldn't want a scene either. Too much had been overheard already. He relaxed as she brushed the lapel of

his uniform shirt before she looked him up and down. This had been her routine on every morning of their married life and he loved her attention. But suddenly her voice hissed quietly into his face.

“When I think of what that man was, of what he is ...!”

He watched her turn away from his stare. Her morning inspection used to be full of admiration but these days her face was blank, pride gone. Their lives were not good.

Sagari’s silence continued to hurt him as she prepared the boys for school, it followed him as he walked along the whitewashed corridor, down the bare stone stairs and into the street. The usual cooking smells drifted around him and, feeling hungry, he wished that he hadn’t been so stubborn and spiteful with her. He had to lose himself in his work, soon.

Sharma had a car to drive to work. He didn’t. His bosses thought it too expensive. Good job he enjoyed walking, it helped him keep his weight down. As he edged across the thoroughfare which ran through Surbjit’s neighbourhood he looked again at the crumbling plaster and small windows. There were thousands of such houses in this part of Magphur. He knew that these dwellings were filled to bursting point with people so that children, uncles and cousins had to sleep on the flat roofs. In streets like these he always thought of his young life in the hills of Himachal Pradesh. His family had shared the same floor, the same roof in the summer, but at least there hadn’t been crowds everywhere. He was grateful that he could afford an apartment for his family in one of the newer blocks which were springing up. There was comfort. Something had been achieved. As he approached the door of Surbjit’s house he could hear arguing voices inside.

The doorway curtains parted suddenly and a boy ran carelessly into his stomach, making him grunt. Surbjit. He gripped the boy by the shoulders and held him at arm’s length. The impression formed when standing behind Captain Sharma in the hotel had been correct. A creature of the gutter. The eyes looked him up and down. It was the same gaze that Kevdan gave him sometimes, the one that made him want to slap his

son's face. Well, maybe he'd have the chance to strike Surbjit when he tried to escape. The boy began to struggle, but then this stopped when he spoke.

"Captain Sharma wants to see you, boy. You must help him by answering a few more questions."

Soon he was making his way through the streets with Surbjit at his side. This job was easier than expected. A good, swift punch was one thing, but chasing the boy through the streets, with many in the crowd hoping he would fall, was not what he needed. He felt too old and tired to run. Strange, the boy did not seem to mind seeing Sharma again. Usually, such vermin avoided the police.

They moved in silence. It was easy to see that this was Surbjit's place, he had a ready answer for all those who called out to him in greeting. Some were amused to see him with a policeman.

"So, Surbjit! They've caught you at last?"

"Yes, and I'll tell them where you've hidden the stolen money."

"Surbjit!" came a voice from an upstairs window. "Why don't you run away from that fat fool of a policeman?"

There was no reply from Surbjit, but there was that look again. His hand moved towards his baton. A chance to give way to his swelling anger would be good, an anger which had grown since he heard that rasping voice. "Fat fool." No-one would ever call out like that to Sharma. But more such words had been thrown at him over the last two years. Surbjit was walking too fast for him. He placed his hand on the boy's left shoulder, feeling only slight resistance. Was this what he'd become? A rat catcher, escorting street children to the police station so that they could be lost in admiration of the heroic Captain Sharma? He spat at the ground and again allowed his mind to roll slowly. Thoughts about his life and his marriage.

Amarjit Gupta, forty-five years of age and, for the past ten years, a sergeant in the police force of Magphur. He could sum himself up very quickly. It had been a quiet, steady life and career – one which had started so well. His schoolteachers, in the mountain village of Rishka, Himachal Pradesh, and later in Kalka,

had praised him highly in front of his parents on his final school day. The pictures of him laughing with classmates showed hope. No other family member had been able to choose a career away from the land.

The police college in Delhi seemed beyond the imaginations of his family. So far away! He'd laughed at their shock, batted away their fears, and tearfully promised to repay the gift of their savings. His village friends, already in awe of his cricket, watched him silently as they took their places tending the rocky land. Back then he had assumed their silence to be respect, but now he wasn't so sure. Anyway, they gave him a good send off and this memory made him smile.

Delhi brought reality. The sloping fields and paths of home were not like the blocked streets where everyone fought for space. People spoke and thought faster, never waiting for the country boy to express views. A gifted athlete on the field and an excellent shot on the range, he found some favour. The classroom was hell. The work was hard amidst the loneliness as the final examinations approached. Books became his only companions but facts and procedures, learned and remembered, were not enough. A position in the bottom half of the class gave him an average future. His parents' pride at his graduation taunted rather than inspired him. He still felt a country boy.

Years of routine in different regions followed. The reports and comments of his superiors followed him, "a safe pair of hands," "orthodox and reliable," "slow to respond to ideas." At last the position of sergeant gave him a desk with a nice view of the Sulon Hills. His *chowkie* consisted of dusty roads, small villages and arguments over stolen livestock.

Sagari changed him and, at thirty-five, he'd been ready for change. She had been visiting an elderly uncle at one of the hill farms. An investigation of a broken fence and escaped goats had taken him away from his form filling. The old man, unwilling to admit that he could not manage, insisted his animals had been stolen. Mending the fence, tidying up after an old fool too stubborn to move into the town had been the best of his day before Sagari appeared round the crumbling stone wall. She must have been watching him as he stood

muttering at the broken wood. Finally, he returned her gaze before moving to sit next to her on the remains of the wall. She hadn't turned away.

Their courtship had begun with shyness, sitting side by side at family gatherings. Later, their laughter flowed and blended. She was thirteen years younger than him, already late in the marriage stakes, and from Magphur, the big city. Their families considered them a good match, despite his age. She wanted her life, and the lives of the children she would have, to be in the city near her family. He'd been less sure, but her ambition moved him.

The following three years in Magphur were happy and he had a reason to work hard. The city's police station became his. A temporary promotion, always under review, but he'd closed his mind to this. Hard work would bring reward, he'd thought. All procedures were correctly followed and paperwork was properly filed. He became lost in routine, didn't see different times coming. He shuddered as he thought of the burning cars and stalls, those terrified faces pleading for protection, the wave of mutilations and murders. Crime was changing and he had no answers to give ...

Then, six years ago, Sanjay Sharma had appeared. A different type of police officer. Inspirational, it was said, unorthodox as well as ruthless and ambitious. He knew Magphur. The compliments flew around him. Questions about a wild past were soon pushed aside by quick results. Commissioner Gopal, delighted with progress, gave Sharma the station whilst he was given a job which was "more suited to his abilities." Sharma's "adviser." To hell with that! He was no more than Sharma's servant. If Sagari could see inside his mind, she wouldn't think him so passive. His chance would come when ...

"Stand back, sahib!"

Surbjit's voice shattered his thoughts and he felt a hand pushing into his leg, moving him back. The people and the traffic woke him up. He could almost touch the wheels of the passing truck. The boy looked worried. No time to feel grateful. Laughter came from somewhere in the crowd, someone would have liked to see him killed. The police station was round the next corner, this job would soon be over.

“Sah, are you alright?”

Surbjit’s voice cleared his senses. Grabbing the boy’s arm, he dragged him through the noise, across the road and hurried towards their destination. No more thinking, get the job done.

Soon he was standing in front of Sharma’s desk, looking down at the top of his officer’s head. He felt Surbjit’s eyes on him again and he tried hard to hide his thoughts. Sharma did not look up when he spoke.

“Thank you, Segeant Gupta. That will be all.”

He’d been dismissed and, when Surbjit smiled, he could almost taste the rage. He span on his heel and left the office which had once been his.

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He was sitting at his desk in his cramped room, paperwork spread out before him. His eyes were facing the pages but he saw nothing. Then Sharma was in front of him, dark eyes alive. Instinct told him that there was new information about the murder. That street boy must have come up with something. He wouldn’t trust such evidence if he was still in charge. A European’s death was a serious matter. Sharma’s voice was full of energy.

“Sergeant Gupta, the boy has told me that Ralph Thomas believed that he was being followed, that he was a man who expected something bad to happen. His camera was full of pictures of the old city. Surbjit thought he knew our streets. I have a feeling about this case. We will learn much more when we interview the other passengers on the bus again. Gather them together at the hotel. Also ...”

He listened silently and groaned inwardly. He knew what was coming.

“... I feel that Mansoor is somewhere in the details of this murder. His gang has shown an interest in Europeans before. Use your contacts, use them tonight. I want to know what has been happening on the streets.”

More dirty work. Sharma saw Mansoor in every crime. Now he was expected to dig for information to give more publicity and more promotion to this jumped up street boy with his film star looks and pressed uniform. Sharma had his own street contacts. Why didn't he use them? No, he'd rather give orders. Sagari had once urged him to look into Sharma's past to see whether the gang leader and the policeman had ever been close. She'd snorted in disgust when he'd turned away. Yet, he had looked into the past. It was true that young Sharma had been a real hell raiser. He certainly would have run the streets at the same time as Mansoor. Quite a change had taken place! There had been rumours that he had used bribes to gain advancement, that he had the support of a someone wealthy. Gaps in Sharma's past needed filling.

"Captain, with respect, you're just guessing. There is nothing yet to suggest that your ... er ... old friend Mansoor ..."

Friend? Where had that come from? Had he been hoping to make Sharma lose his cool, behave like the street dweller that he was? He barely knew his own thoughts these days.

"Sergeant," the smile had not slipped. "Mansoor is no-one's friend. You must follow me along this path so that we can discount one line of enquiry. You know now the way I like to work."

Yes, these ways are fast, confusing and not always within the rules. He shuddered at the thought of another dark meeting with a police informer. Gathering guests in the hotel foyer would be easier. That would mean just a couple of phone calls which he could delegate. He gave his voice just the right tinge of sarcasm.

"Captain Sharma, you'd trust me with this?"

"Sergeant Gupta, I'd trust you with all things."

Sanjay widened the charming smile, the hateful one, and left the room.

*

He knew where he was going in the darkness. He had phoned Sagari to say that he would be very late and that she must not worry. Her replies had been short, dull-voiced and his bitter thoughts had returned. Then, pulling himself together, he had changed out of his uniform. After parking once again in the shadows of Banda Road, he began to walk. The pistol tightened the waistband of his trousers. Just a precaution. Glancing around, checking, he side stepped away from the traffic and the only street light. The alley wrapped itself around him.

The empty, single storey dwelling would soon be under a new road. Just as well, for one shouldn't use the same place too often to meet with informers. Routine was good, but it meant danger when dealing with such people. He stepped through the open doorway and looked towards the small candle flame which only just showed the outline of the squatting man's face. There was a long silence before the whispered words.

"I've been waiting ... *Sergeant* Gupta."

The voice was hoarse and quiet with age but the intention was clear. He waited for the footsteps to pass outside before he too whispered.

"This won't be a long meeting. Just answer my questions then you'll be paid."

There was another long silence, broken only by more shuffling footsteps and muttering voices outside. He squatted in the middle of the dirt floor and waited. Too many people moving outside, even at this time, scavenging for anything of value before the bulldozers moved in.

"You were not always so anxious to do your job, Amarjit. Is it your boss who is making you jump? The magnificent Sharma, eh? There was a time when he was not such a worthy man. I remember ..."

Someone was standing just outside the open door of the derelict house. Coming here had been a bad move. He pressed himself against the rough wall, reaching for his gun and, as he did so, he sensed the blade being drawn on the other side of the room. He moved his hand away from the gun. No need for that. The

candle flame vanished. Cigarette smoke wafted into the dark room before the footsteps moved away up the narrow street. The voice came again from the darkness.

“What do you want to know? Quickly! I need money.”

“The Englishman. The one who was shot. Did Mansoor have him followed? Why?”

The informer laughed drily, the walking stick scraping on the hard floor, moving forward. Too close, too tempting. Even this dog gave him no respect. The words, closer now, bit into his brain, making him want to fire his gun at the voice.

“Death of an English tourist, eh? Looks bad, does it? Sharma geeting all the glory whilst you dig amongst the shit? You know what? Forget the money. I’d like to see you and Sharma tear yourselves apart over this.”

The man’s spittle was on his chin. With a cry he leapt forward, clawing the darkness. His left hand brushed a grizzled cheek and gripped a bony shoulder to stop the slithering escape. With all his strength, he swung the informer into the darker corner of the room. There was a fall, a grunt of pain, then the scrape of a blade against stone.

“Get back, *Sergeant* Gupta, or this will be the place of your death and the rubble will be your grave.”

Again there was the sound of metal on stone. This time there was a spark. Lashing out with his left foot, he was satisfied to feel the blow connect with the kneeling man’s chest. The blade made a shallow cut in his calf, but the thrust was weak, undirected, and he heard the weapon fall to the floor beneath him. Then he was stooping, reaching forward, gripping again, before hauling the limp body towards more light. Had anyone heard the struggle? If they had, it was likely that they would be left alone. If there was a body at the end of this it could be easily hidden. No-one would care.

He was pressing the sagging man against the wall next to the door. The body smell was all around him.

“Now, I need to know if Mansoor ... the gang ... knows anything about the Englishman’s death.”

The old man was in pain and the words burst through his breath.

“All I know is ... the dead one had ... something of value ... Mansoor wants it ... had him followed ... Wanted him alive ... That’s all...”

“What is it that Mansoor wants?” asked Gupta, tightening his grip.

“Give me more time ... more money. It’s dangerous. Meet me again and I’ll tell you more.”

After a moment, he pulled the wheezing man away from the wall and threw him down. Reaching into the breast pocket of his damp shirt, he touched the rupees before pausing. This meeting had given him nothing. He spoke towards the loud, heavy breath.

“You’ve told me nothing new. Mansoor is mixed up in everything. I need more ...”

“Then you must ask Sharma. He too has his sources. People worse than Mansoor. Not a dried bag of bones like me. He looks after them well in return for information. Yes, I think you need to speak to Sharma.”

His heart was beating now. It had been a fool’s journey to this place, one he had made many times. Something could still be gained.

“Who does Sharma see? He offers protection to ...?”

“I will find out for you, Amarjit. But it will take more money. Would you like me to help you, eh? I can find out about Sharma.”

He threw the money and listened as it was gathered from the dirt. Disgust washed over him. Disgust at the man’s greed and disgust at himself. The grey light of the doorway was filled for a few seconds and was then empty. Breathing, croaking laughter, moved away down the alleyway. He sank to the floor and crawled to sit against the wall, head resting on his arms.

Day was dawning when he finally rose, stretched and made his way out of the house and back the way he had come. He thrust back his shoulders. Eyes were watching him, he could feel them. Well then, he would walk proudly, as a policeman should, and try to ignore the tears which had begun to sting his eyes. It was tiredness, that was all. He hoped that the car would be as he had left it; he needed to be with his family as they awoke.

Chapter Nine. Rehman.

Rehman Singh looked around his new office and was pleased, once again, with the evidence of his success. The room was arranged in a way which contented him for now. He would ask his assistants to change things around if he became restless again. He rose and walked away from the neatly ordered surface of his spacious oak desk – this case bored him – and moved towards the wide window with its magnificent view of Magphur. This window, which covered the whole of one wall, was a design feature which he had demanded. He smiled at the thought of the influence which he could exert and it was good to have friends in high, and not so high, places. Calling in a favour now and then gratified him.

Then the uncomfortable, nagging thought came to him again and would not go away. His moods changed so often. That bastard Mansoor had set him up in this office to follow his instructions. Rehman Singh, tame lawyer. Oh, he could pursue his own cases when he chose but, whenever Mansoor called, he knew he had to drop everything to become that crook's "legal brain." Smiling grimly, he went into his past to ponder his weakness. That few seconds of corruption, when he'd agreed to Mansoor's offers, had furthered his career in a way in which years of study, and of honesty, could not. Temptation had defeated him. How many times had he given advice helping crooks to escape from ruin in court? And he knew now that he would probably continue to do so until the end of his useful life. When no longer useful, would Mansoor trust him to keep his silence? A question to be considered more and more when there was growing danger behind Mansoor's smile.

He looked down at the massive building site, scanning the change. The scene far below him, with the spreading network of girders and concrete slabs, had altered since yesterday morning. There was the wall which separated the development from the edge of the shanties. A new one appeared every day it seemed. Children from the crooked huts saw the barrier as a challenge, sometimes making the new bricks move and fall as they climbed. The builders could never catch them. The scurrying, swarming workers in their hard hats and dusty clothes were changing the face of Magphur at a pace which fascinated him. He hoped that, as the city grew, he would still be able to see the old town, once his home. No sentiment here. Just that looking

down on the packed hovels made him feel even more successful. Those children, breaking down the wall every day, wanted something better. It was a human need.

A swift look at his Rolex, a gift from a grateful client, and he turned away from Magphur. Half past two, the hottest time outside when he could sit and enjoy the air conditioning. No more work today. He moved languidly to one of the two leather armchairs which occupied a central position in the office, the part of the room where he interviewed in comfort. The leather was soft and, swivelling the chair, he smiled to himself, still feeling the novelty of his recently acquired surroundings. All negative thoughts slid away for life really had been kind.

He considered his position in the world. Certificates and diplomas on display were evidence of the education he had gained through hard work. His parents had given so much ... But that was the past. The present was here in this room: the plush, cream coloured, fitted carpet and the gold filigree which intertwined its way through the pale green wallpaper. The statues and the ornamental vases made him a man of good taste, someone who could pick and choose cases. The wealthy were prepared to pay well for they knew that his ratio of success in court was unusually, some would say remarkably, high. The evening pleasures lay ahead of him.

His mobile vibrated and he was alert. The screen number made his heart leap and he forced his voice to be calm.

“Hello”

“You’ve not forgotten our meeting, Rehman?” The icy, controlled tone was familiar.

“Of course not, but that’s not until tomorrow” He made his voice strong. Mansoor could always sniff out doubt.

“It must be earlier... today. Make it three o’clock. I could come to your splendid office....”

“No!” Too sharp. “Don’t come here. I can still meet you at the restaurant. They’ll change the time of the booking for me.”

“Are you afraid your staff might see me and recognise me, Rehman?” There was a mockery in the question.

“No, of course not, but why have you ...?”

The line had gone dead and the conversation was over. He sat upright looking down at the phone, sweating. The evening ahead no longer invited him as the prospect of the meeting preyed on his mind. One of the penalties of his success.

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The Mountain View Restaurant was new and empty. Waiters moved between the decorated pillars and arches preparing for the evening when the room would be full of well-dressed diners. As he watched this scene from his usual corner table despair claimed him. Changing his appointments for Mansoor always made him feel small and now the bastard was late. Waiting was killing him. Seeing the rolled up copy of *The Magphur Gazette*, which had been placed on the table for him, he picked it up to look at the first page. One headline caught his eye: BRITISH TOURIST FOUND MURDERED. That would have the police scampering around limiting any damage. Impatiently, he threw the paper to one side and started to scroll through the messages on his phone. He was needed elsewhere, damn it, and still no Mansoor. His gaze drifted towards the open French windows and the sunlit garden. A gleaming white marquee was set up ready for a celebration. A wedding probably. Family members would fill the area – laughing, eating and drinking. He’d not seen his own family for many years. Expelling the memories, he sipped his hot, sweet tea from the delicate china cup. Eating and drinking in fine surroundings usually restored his good humour. Not this time. The Mountain View Restaurant. Any view of the distant mountains was becoming hidden by growing buildings.

Then he was no longer alone. He looked up from the dregs at the bottom of his cup and saw Mansoor was standing there smiling. No sound of an approach. Mansoor, smartly dressed as ever, in a light grey suit with matching tie. Workouts and tailored clothes could not quite mask the gathering fat. The black hair was immaculately cut and slicked back so that the first impression of respectability was spoiled by this lizard-like feature. The voice was quiet, just above a whisper, but powerful.

“Rehman, my dear friend, you look lost in your thoughts. Thank you for agreeing to meet me at my favourite place of business.”

Mansoor slid into the other seat at the table and held out his hand in greeting. He gripped the hand, a sign of friendship which he did not feel. The skin was cold and clammy, the long fingers wrapped like a trap. The eyes were fixed, looking for signs of fear, forcing him to look away as though seeking the waiter’s attention. As usual, he made himself calm as his hand was released.

“Mansoor, it’s always a pleasure to talk with you. Shall we eat before we get down to business? I recommend the *gushtaba*. Truly excellent.”

“Oh,” said Mansoor pleasantly, “I think we can combine business with pleasure. Let’s eat and talk. You know I’m a busy man.”

The *gushtaba* and *paneer* was soon brought. Service was always good at The Mountain View. Mansoor’s thick, greasy lips drew his gaze, chewing his food slowly before wiping the corners of his mouth delicately with the napkin. A street man trying hard to be refined. There were still lessons to be learned. Mansoor’s voice was thick with the food.

“Don’t you find the service in these places much more efficient when you are known to be wealthy?”

The words were smug but the point was a good one. He relaxed and began to enjoy his food and the close attendance of the two waiters. The afternoon could pass pleasantly after all. Then he saw Mansoor’s stare and such thoughts were gone. He swallowed hard, drank water to stop his cough, and waited.

“Rehman, my dear friend, you will always be my man. I must ask you for another small favour. It may be onerous, but you’ll be paid as well as ever.” Mansoor pushed his empty plate away and snapped his fingers for the waiter. “Will you take *kulfi*, Rehman? They have an excellent selection of sweets.”

He held up his palms in a gesture of polite refusal before laying his fork on the remains of his meal, no longer hungry. A small dish of ice cream was brought, a scent of cardamom, and Mansoor gave a satisfied sigh.

“Forgive me, Rehman. The older I get, the sweeter my tooth becomes.”

He watched quietly as Mansoor devoured the sweet, spoon scraping, before leaning back to speak quickly.

“Captain Sanjay Sharma. You’ve heard of him?”

“Yes.” The point of the meeting was coming. Although I’ve never met him, his name is known to me in connection with all sorts of cases. A successful officer ...”

“You know something of his background?” Mansoor leaned forward as he spoke. His hands had formed into fists on the table before him.

“I know that he has risen from ... uh ... poor beginnings,” replied Rehman hesitantly. “He’s done well to ...

“Ha! I know him too. Sanjay Sharma and I go back a long way. He’s a man who knows no rules ... a man who’s ridden his luck too far!” The nearest diners had gone silent. Mansoor smiled again.

He wanted this meeting to end quickly. As he asked the question he knew that he had accepted the inevitable. Trouble would come with these words. “What do you want me to do?”

The other man became charming again. “It’s always a pleasure doing business with you, Rehman. You know how to find the heart of matters.” The voice was quiet, insistent. “I have a strong feeling that Sharma

has done things, quite recently, which a policeman should not. I want to know more about these matters. Get one of your trusted colleagues to build a dossier, a case against Captain Sanjay Sharma.” He laughed quietly. “You see, as a good citizen of the new Magphur, I want to help stamp out police corruption.”

He considered his reply, a lawyer’s approach, “I’ve never heard anything said against Captain Sharma. I’m told that he is a man of the utmost integrity, everyone speaks very highly of him. Forgive me, but if you know Captain Sharma so well you may be better placed to learn more about his methods. My people are not detectives, we may not be able to find ...”

“You’re being paid to uncover evidence,” Mansoor hissed. “You’ll find something, I know it. Use your creative intelligence, my friend.” The smile returned. “I wish I could help you, but I have too many delicate enterprises at this stage. You understand. Besides, in the interests of new Magphur, I want any case against him to be based on honest fact, you would use the word “watertight.” I want the type of information which a reputable legal man like yourself will find. It must stand up in court. Now, please, allow me to settle the bill for what has been a very pleasant afternoon.”

He watched dumbly as Mansoor summoned the waiter and paid the bill. He barely felt the hearty slap on his back or registered that he was alone at the table. What next? This wasn’t the worst task he’d been given. This job could be kept on the right side of the law. Such a balancing act had been managed many times before. Maybe Sharma did have a guilty secret which should be uncovered. Mansoor knew more than he was saying. He’d put young Vijay on the case. An ambitious young man who could be trusted...given the right incentive.

He left the shade of the The Mountain View and walked down the white steps to his car, sliding in through the open rear door. The leather seat comforted him as did the knowledge that several thousand rupees would be added to his bank account by the end of the day. The usual rate. Mansoor was always prompt.

As the car crawled back through the Magphur crowds towards his office, he pressed the button to slide up the glass, separating him from his driver. Anxious to think about something else, he again picked up a copy of *The Magphur Gazette* and read more about the murder of the Englishman.

Chapter Ten. Mansoor.

He straightened his tie and looked at himself in the mirrored wall as his personal elevator made its way up to his top floor apartment. He liked what he saw. Hair expensively cut and slicked back in a style which suited him, trim face and body after sessions in the gym, suit made to measure. This power look, worked for, gave him a good start in his business dealings. He practised his hard gaze and forced the smile away so that there was no hint of softness. With a single chime, the lift came to a halt. A right turn and he was in the carpeted luxury of his home.

This was the time when he always stood still, whilst the lift doors slid shut, to survey his surroundings with pride. So much space! And it was his. As a boy he had crawled over brothers and sisters to reach his dark corner. That hulking pig of a father had heaved into his family's life now and then to bully his way to food and money. That had been his youth. His chosen memories drove him on in the new Magphur.

Again, looking around, he gave silent thanks for his good fortune. Who was he thanking? There were no gods to be turned to, he was a self-made man, forging a way through life with his fists, pushing aside others to lead the pack. This new home, and his life outside it, had been bought and paid for by the use of skills honed in alleyways which he no longer visited. His paymasters, and there were many, bid highly for his ability to give fear and pain to their enemies. Beating the shit out of those who couldn't see sense had always given him pleasure and he missed the action. These days his talents lay in organising others to carry out this work. He was a businessman, a manager, no different from those who paid him quietly whilst keeping their own respectability. The power he used was real and easily understood.

He unbuttoned his jacket, stepping over to the drinks cabinet. As he reached towards the cut glass, his hand stopped. No need for a drink yet, a clear head was needed. He sank heavily into the nearest armchair to wait for the phone call. How could he have switched off, even for a moment? Thinking of the past, being satisfied with the present, allowing thoughts which gained nothing. This was happening more often and he didn't like it. The meeting with that fool Rehman had gone well. There must be dirt to be found in Sharma's past to add to that which he knew already. The search had to be his focus.

Images formed in his mind: boys running together, shouting and screaming as they sped and swerved in stolen cars through the darkness and the dust. Fire, blood and people running in fear. Sanjay and Mansoor. Mansoor and Sanjay. They were the same. He smiled as he remembered the night, long ago, when they smashed the window of the English Liquor Store and reached through the jagged glass to grasp the bottles. There was the small scar on his wrist, partly hidden behind his bracelet. Just the two of them, no-one else, had run into the caked mud and the ditches of the building site, whooping and screaming their defiance, before finding a place to become violently drunk. They'd fought then for no real purpose other than to use stored up energy, their blood had mingled as they laughed. Their heads and bodies had ached next morning, yet they exchanged smiles. This memory stayed solid and clear whenever he recalled the chaos of those early years.

There were other times too. High spirits were left behind as they dared themselves into violence. There was the fire, the one who pleaded and then screamed before dying. They had only meant to frighten the boy but, after their yelping madness, there was a body. Difficult to recall the living face before that first killing. He'd swung the *lathi* towards the back of the boy's head, again and again, so that he fell in his own blood...

Sanjay had been there and his face, trying hard not to show fear, was with him now. In that instant their wild friendship had been broken. Sometimes, he could shut out the flames, the dying boy's face, but Sanjay's eyes were before him at all times – at work, at play – knowing his thoughts in those seconds after the kill. He had to find a way to destroy that look. Again the past had trapped him and he shook his mind clear.

The trilling phone awoke him and he jabbed his hand to take it from the low table. Clearing his head quickly, he prepared for work. The voice on the line was pure business.

"Mansoor, why haven't you got back to me?"

It was the expected call. Rohith Singh. The case was an ordinary one, the details easy to bring to mind. This idiot kept a successful string of car dealers. Two of his shops were right in the line of road development

which, it was said, would help solve traffic congestion in Magphur. Then there was the compensation offered by local government officials - not enough for Rohith - the dealer's complaints in high places, his attempts at bribery, his threats to prosecute which had fallen on deaf ears and, finally, his pleas for assistance in this very apartment. Rohith was greedy, ready to swindle anybody, but quick to see persecution when his own interests were affected. His cars were often faulty and dangerous but, to Rohith Singh, this was business. Well placed payments had bought him safety. This time, however, his wealth could not halt progress. This client had lead an easy life, running an inherited business, now he was whining at the first sign of real trouble. Snivelling rat.

“Ah, Rohith, my friend. How good to hear from you...”

“Never mind that. I want to know when your people are going after that bastard Mohan Khan. He's making my life hell. He will not back down from his attempts to ruin me.”

Mohan Khan, the town planner, a name brought to him by several clients. Clearly it would be in many people's interest to have this incorruptible piece of filth worked over and thrown on a dungheap. Still, first things first, he didn't like Rohith Singh's tone.

“Rohith, before you go any further, I suggest you begin by showing me the same respect I've shown you. Otherwise, after I end this conversation, it will be you who'll receive a visit. Clear?”

There was the expected pause at the other end of the line.

“My apologies, sah, it is only my concern for my family which makes me choose my words carelessly. I only want ...”

“I know exactly what you want, Rohith, and I've said that it will happen. Mohan Khan will learn how to behave towards you. But the time must suit me. Oh, and there'll be more expenses. The subject of our conversation will be dealt with in his own home. He's an important man and money must be paid to silence nosey reporters. I'm sure you understand.”

“How much?” Good to hear the discomfort.

“Oh,” he said casually, “no more than seven hundred lakh rupees. That should take care of everything.”

“What! But that’s the value of one of my biggest showrooms. You can’t...”

Putting down the phone, he stood up and moved towards the cabinet. As he poured himself a scotch the phone rang again. He savoured his first sip before strolling back across the room to pick up the receiver.

Rohith Singh’s voice was pained, the words carefully chosen.

“I find your terms acceptable, of course. Please ... I hope our enterprise will continue.”

“Of course, my friend, and, may I say, that you’re a very wise man. You’ll be hearing from me.”

The whiskey tasted even better now. A troublesome official would be taken out of the way soon. Rohith Singh would pay well before knowing that he too was on a list of subjects to be dealt with. He toasted business and drained his glass quickly. Life was good... and yet.

The whiskey gripped the back of his throat, its warmth spreading. Another was needed, a large one. He stopped himself again. Business wasn’t finished. It never ended. He pondered for a long time. Business? Had he truly left the streets, even in this fancy apartment? He had a different way of speaking these days, with words he’d learned from mixing with people like Rehman, but the work, the pain, the violence was still the same ... only now he wore a suit, didn’t get his hands dirty and the threats were quiet and smooth. Oh, there’d been departures into other ventures: drugs, blackmail. Hidden crimes. Still he often caught the looks from those who worked near him, those who’d spent a lifetime hiding behind a show of respectability. They saw him as a thug, a lowlife *goonda* – one who offered a needed service without hope of ever becoming a major player. Well, he’d started to move up and those same people would think differently... soon.

Slumbering in the late afternoon light, resting while he could, he let his thoughts wander between dreams and wakefulness. She was there again, in the market place, her green eyes looking past him, a smile lighting up her face. Seema. As a boy, he’d moved to be seen by her whenever she was near; he’d press close against

her in the crowd. But so often she'd turn her head away and lift her silk to hide the bottom half of her face. He'd watched silently as she lived her life. He saw how she looked at Sanjay and became jealous of the comfortable way they were together. He told himself, and anyone who would listen, that he was happy to stand aside to allow "his friend Sanjay" to court Seema. They were never aware of him when they were together, no matter how much noise he made. Cursing, he sat up. This was no good. Time to be out in Magphur, seeing people and being seen. He stood up to pace the room, waking himself up.

He was standing before the lift mirror once more straightening his tie, again rehearsing the look which would see him through the evening. The routine was set. A table had been booked for him at The Narcissus Restaurant on Chondra Drive. From his corner he would eat lightly, drink mineral water and make phone calls. Hold court in a public place, show his power. His driver, Asif, knew his routine and would wait patiently.

He looked away from the waiting car to see her across the street ... Seema. She was standing quite still as the people moved around her. This time she was looking at him. Stopping, he stared at her smiled. Then the crowd swallowed her up and she was gone.

Sitting, travelling towards the restaurant, he tried to make himself think of the day's work. Over the years he'd become skilled at forcing her face from his mind. It was as though the memories of the past had brought her to him. Hah! That was stupid, dreaming talk! But what was she doing in his part of the city? She'd been looking at him, he was sure.

The car pulled up, the door was opened and he walked towards his work.

Chapter Eleven. Seema.

She felt Sanjay slip from her side in the darkness and didn't try to stop him. It was never a good idea to try to talk to him at these times. He needed space. Seconds earlier he had awoken to cling to her before breaking away, swiftly and silently. This was part of their life together. His movements had been the same over many dawns. Sometimes it was the Muslim call to prayer – long and mournful at three o'clock every morning – which would wake him. Often it was the pictures in his mind which caused him to leave their bed. Tonight it had been the dreams.

She lifted herself on to her right elbow and saw Sanjay's shadow, cast by the night lamp in the corridor, as he pulled on his robe. She tensed slightly when she heard his light footsteps tiptoeing past their daughters' bedroom. Mandeep, eight, was aware of things now. Two years time and Sural would be at the same stage. Neither should be troubled by their father's world. Sinking, sighing, back on her pillow she thought about soothing him. Wide awake, throwing the sheet aside, she moved from the bed.

Sanjay was leaning on the edge of the sink. The noise of a passing car stopped suddenly so that the silence stood out, demanding words. Pulling her silk dressing gown more tightly and folding her arms, she began.

"You're thinking about the boy again. The fire death., Sanjay, that was years ago, you can't..."

"No," he interrupted, rising anger showing as he turned. "Not this time ...It's the old man's death which won't leave me. It's different..."

No, the way he'd left their bed had told her this wasn't true. He couldn't hide anything from her after all these years.

"Sanjay!" Her voice was sharp. "This is always the time when you think about the way things were." She paused. "It wasn't you who killed..."

"I was there!" his words came out in a hiss and made her step back.

They both heard the muffled cry from the bedroom. She turned swiftly to go to her waking daughter, leaving him standing, staring. As she held Sural in her arms, humming the simple song, her mind wandered. The conversations with Sanjay, about his days with the street gang, returned to her mind like a creeping fog. She couldn't rid herself of the image of her husband, the young thug, looking on as the boy, pleading in front of the flames as though taking part in a ritual...

Sanjay's past was shared knowledge. She asked no questions, just helped him when she could by speaking plainly, her own thoughts hidden. Sural was breathing steadily, asleep again. Laying her down on the bed, gently replacing the cover, she crept out of the room. Sanjay was sitting at the table as the dawn spread into the kitchen. She sat opposite and reached across for his hand; he interlocked his fingers with hers in their usual way, making her smile.

"Sanjay," she whispered. "This can't go on. These thoughts will make you mad. You've punished yourself, and us, for long enough."

"This is the one, I feel it," said Sanjay. He hadn't been listening. The madness was in his voice. "This is the death which will lead me to Mansoor. He's at the heart of this murder."

"Sanjay, listen to me." She moved her face closer to his. "You've said this many times before. You fought with Mansoor when you ran the streets together. That fight was over many years ago. He's powerful now. Out of your reach."

"I'm powerful too," said Sanjay, snatching his hand away. He stood up and walked back to the window. The waking city's sounds came into the room. His back was turned, his voice determined. "I know the way he thinks ... his strengths and weaknesses. We're the same, still fighting, I ..."

Sanjay's voice faltered, in three paces she was at his side. Placing her hands on his shoulders she turned him to face her before speaking even more urgently.

“Sanjay, Mansoor’s no longer the boy you knew. He’s in an office now, high in new Magphur. He can buy anything or anyone he wants. Solve this case, yes. That’s your job. But stop chasing him. There’s no need. That time has gone.”

She gazed hard into his face, trying to force her will into his mind. But it was no good. She let him take her hands from his shoulders. His voice was gentle. “Seema, I’ve changed too, you know that. I want to throw the past away and I can only do that when Mansoor has gone. Anyway, he’s guilty of so many things it’s only a matter of time. Don’t worry. I’ll end all this soon.”

The children were moving, waking. She entered her daughters’ room, defeated. They were sitting, one on each side of their bed. Mandeep stared ahead, her mind perhaps full of overheard words. Sural stood up and ran into her arms, anxious to start the day. The morning ritual of finding clothes, preparing for school, answering questions, brought her comfort. By the time she entered the eating area with the girls Sanjay had gone. An early start for them all.

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The apartment was quiet and empty. The breakfast had been cleared, the school bus waved off and now her own day stretched ahead. This was usually a peaceful time, but now she was troubled. There were Sanjay’s nightmares and the fact that their family life could no longer calm him. It was easy to imagine the images of Sanjay’s sleeping hours. She knew what parts of the city were like so that the savagery of his dreams never surprised her. Her mind drifted into the past again for she was always less troubled when she remembered her early days with Sanjay. Amongst those days, perhaps, she could find a way to understand his ways now.

She’d seen Sanjay before meeting him. That day in the old Magphur market. Aged sixteen, she’d been following her parents aimlessly. The crowd had irritated her making her long for the privacy of their small house. Then she’d noticed the group of boys lounging up ahead in the shade and quickly turned away from those stares to look at the silks on the nearest stall. Twelve of them, all street tough. But one had caught her eye with his difference and she’d watched him through the hanging material. The other boys had turned to

look at other places, glaring, but this one had followed her with his eyes. His face had shown the faint signs of a smile, a hint of kindness. Then the crowd had taken him from her sight and, when her view was clear again, he'd gone with his friends. Her mother's call had made her move away too but she'd searched the crowd as she dragged her feet away.

Her quiet home life became restless. Running errands in the market place had suddenly become most enjoyable. Sometimes she saw him and, when he noticed her, their smiles met. He was always with the gang. She hated the rumours – there was talk of beatings, stealing - but always there was Sanjay. He couldn't be part of anything bad.

She picked up Sural's doll. The girls were growing fast. The family photographs showed this. In more than one, Sanjay stood proudly in his uniform. She loved the one in which they posed formally with the girls. No hint of trouble in Sanjay's face in that picture. But what had he been thinking when standing beside her for the camera?

The boy she had searched for in the market had altered beyond recognition as he had gained respect. She thought of the old story again. The one told several times by those who said they'd been there. In her mind she could retell this almost word for word, like a mantra. There were people who swore that things had happened differently but this was the story which pushed all other tellings to one side.

The market had been closing for the day. Stall holders were packing up, counting their money and preparing food by the road side. It was the time of cooking fires, the aroma of food and dusk shadows. It had happened by a small stall in the corner of the market. The sellers had been squatting by their fire, talking and laughing when the gang appeared.

“Anything for poor men like us?” asked the gang leader.

There was silence in reply.

“We can help you,” smiled the leader. “We can help by not kicking the life out of you or breaking up your stall. What’s it worth, eh?”

Two of the buyers had stood defiantly and, the story went, this stubbornness had caused the fight. In a blink, the area had become a place of dancing shadows and cries as the gang moved in on the stall. In her mind, she could hear the shouts of anger, the cries of fear and the sound of shattering wood. No-one moved to help, but many people had watched in the gathering darkness.

“Mansoor!”

The voice had been young, strong. Something in the sound had made those who were nearest to the speaker stop kicking, smashing or tearing. In a moment, all had become still. Mansoor, the main man, stepped forward into what had become a circle of his followers to face the one who had called his name.

“So, Sanjay, my friend. Have you stopped because you are tired or do you think we have stuffed our pockets enough?” Mansoor’s voice mocked.

“Yes, Mansoor, I’m tired of us beating old men and of stealing things from those who can’t fight back. I’m telling you to stop.”

“You’re telling me?” said Mansoor through his laughter. He looked around, gaining support so that Sanjay was soon surrounded by laughter. She always imagined him smiling at this point, but she didn’t know this. She’d only been told his words.

“Mansoor!” shouted Sanjay lifting his arm so that an expectant silence spread over the crowd. “You’ve led me to do many things. I’ve stolen and beaten for you. Last night, by the fire ...”

“Shut your mouth, fool,” snapped Mansoor and began moving closer to Sanjay. “You want to tell everything?” He swept his arm towards the listeners. Then, before any reply, he leapt forward like a cat, reaching for Sanjay’s throat.

She'd thought about this scene many times: Mansoor and Sanjay – kicking, gouging, scratching – circling each other. Rolling in the dust, reaching for each other's face with nails and teeth like a pair of street dogs. Raw, blood-filled hatred in that moment. Watchers howling and screaming the fight on.

At last Sanjay had stood over Mansoor who lay on his back like a trapped and wounded animal unable to rise. Sanjay, so it was said, had lifted his foot to kick the remaining strength out of Mansoor. The rest of the gang stood still. Would this be their new leader? Then everything stopped and, sometime during those seconds or moments, Sanjay allowed his raised foot to fall to the floor. He stood there, hunched and panting, before words fell from his cut and bleeding mouth.

“Mansoor. This is the end. I don't want this life any longer... Leave me in peace...Next time I'll finish what I've started.”

With that, Sanjay turned away, forced himself upright and staggered through the parting crowd. Mansoor had risen to his knees, but no-one listened as he shouted his twisted curse into the night. This was the bit of the story which stood out in her mind.

“We'll meet again, Sanjay, you dog! This isn't over! When our paths cross again, you won't be so lucky. There's nowhere to hide from me.” Mansoor spat out his blood as a small number of followers came slowly forward, pulled him to his feet and hustled him away. The beaten boy winced as he whirled his arms, thrusting helpers from him, as he tried to leave the scene of his defeat with as much power as he had left.

This was the legend. She'd heard the story passed from mouth to mouth before and during her time with Sanjay and had formed her own images of that night.

Sanjay must have had somewhere to hide because she did not see him for the next five years, during her parents' illnesses, their deaths and her period of stubborn independence. Then came the day when he was standing before her again, near the new building works. Alone. Her eyes had run up and down this tall man's uniform, but she knew him straight away. The smile had been the same.

They'd spoken to each other then, for the first time, and as they walked through Magphur their courtship began. He told her of his police training in Mumbai, how he'd worked on the running track, the obstacle course and in the classroom. His commendations made him proud. She'd never been to Mumbai, but she thought it must be a place where the past could be hidden and a new life found. When they were together she saw what he was like as he spoke to people with an easy authority which put respect in their eyes. Those that hated his uniform kept out of his way at first. She'd loved without doubt then. Even so, she'd been surprised when promotion had come so quickly. Happy memories stayed with her for a while before she turned to face the day...and the truth. Sanjay was so different now. The work had changed him in ways she could see better than anybody.

Picking up her shawl, she left her home to keep the appointment which she'd arranged.

Chapter Twelve. Manish.

He was walking in the middle of the group, surrounded like a prisoner. The fear had become part of him: sweating palms, fast breathing, eyes darting from side to side. He wondered whether the other four people in the group felt the same; his quick glances at their faces, as they looked straight ahead, told him nothing. They'd been on jobs like this before. Manish noticed that Ashwin, always their leader, was smiling at the thought of what was to come.

No backing out now. How had it come to this? He'd known Ashwin, Gurinder and Jemal forever, had played with them in the dusty streets, helped them part the river mud to look for things to sell. Growing up, money was everything and still was. He'd spent most of his working time helping his father on the sad little stall whilst Gurinder and Jemal had washed cars. Ashwin would disappear for many weeks at a time. Sometimes the four boys would meet to sell bottled water to drivers in traffic jams. Gurinder and Jem had become serious and angry teenagers. Ashwin – with his motorbike and sharp clothes – showed wealth and was happy.

Rumours about Ashwin grew: he stole cars or money, he peddled *ganja* and had never been caught. Ashwin had sat beside him in the dust, months ago, and asked him the quiet question. Why work on a market stall when there was quicker money to be made by simply following the orders of rich men? The only rule, said Ashwin, was never to ask why. And so he, like Gurinder and Jemal, had found new friends, others who wanted to earn rupees speedily from the pain and blood of others. He was with people he had once known, but this did not ease his fear.

They left the main, sunlit alley to enter the shady, narrow alleyway of two storey, flat roofed houses. The world closed in and his heart sank. Ten paces would take you from one side of the alley to the other. He had been to this neighbourhood once before and again he found himself imagining these homes flattened, new buildings rising, stage by stage, over the rubble. This was all people talked about. It wouldn't be long before the bulldozers moved on empty, lifeless houses.

A young girl, no more than five or six, appeared around the corner at the far end of the alley. She ran towards Ashwin, her eyes on his smile, before suddenly turning right to dash through the curtain of a house entrance. This one was lived in. His heart hit his ribs and he steadied his shaking legs. With a lifted hand, Ashwin stopped the group in front of the still moving curtain. Ashwin spat his *paan* juice into the gutter and shouted his mockery.

“Satpal!” A grinning pause. “Satpal! Come out of your shitheap. Talk to us. We want to see you, my friend.”

He’d watched Ashwin carrying out punishments, and there’d been sleepless nights afterwards. Watched? The beatings, just stopping short of death, had shaken him but his fists and feet still ached. No, he’d been more than a witness. He’d got over the horror, but the fear stayed with him. Afterwards, each time, he’d been sick and they’d laughed. Ashwin just watched him as he threw up.

And yet here he was again. Satpal had done something wrong, perhaps not paid his dues. Who cared? Not Gurinder or Jemal, Ashwin’s best pupils. They’d been give a job to do and that was it. For him it was another test. They’d tried him out when the council official had been kicked unconscious in the street. The second time was when that shopkeeper had come out of work to be smashed to a bloody mess as he began to walk home with his money. The punished ones had been left in the street to be seen. There were no witnesses, for no-one would speak, but everyone would know that the gang had to be obeyed. Fear made people silent, obedient. He stood there quietly wondering what Ashwin was going to make him do this time.

He loved the feeling of the rupees earned. His family’s faces made him wonder how much they suspected or knew. Father and Mother turned away from him sometimes as though they knew about his other life. It would be good to see their smiles now. Surbjit was growing up fast and was becoming aware of everything. There had to be kind words between them soon. The little rat must never join the gang. He was better than that. He’d heard that he’d been talking to the police! Ashwin called again.

“Satpal! What are you afraid of?”

A wait. Then Ashwin whispered his orders to Gurinder and Jemal who burst through the curtain and into the home. He heard a woman's voice, pleading, followed by the cries of at least three children, and began to feel sick again as Ashwin turned to him, spitting into his face.

"There must be no mistakes this time or it'll be your turn. I'll be right beside you."

More sounds from inside: scuffling feet on the earth, the grunts of struggling men and a woman's wail calling after Satpal. How would his own family face that?

Then the curtain flew as Satpal was dragged and pushed to his knees in front of Ashwin. The little man was desperate, panting, he looked at the ground shaking his head, trying to make the moments go away. So ordinary, with his black, messy hair and thin moustache, probably wondering how it had come to this. The street's windows were blank. No sign of life, yet people would see the beating.

He blinked as Gurinder, to prove himself, reached down to grip Satpal's hair, jerking his head back to make him look up towards Ashwin's voice.

"You've been hiding from us, Satpal, and your friends have missed you. We're also missing the money you owe us." Then the words were like death as Ashwin moved his face downwards, inches from Satpal's closed eyes. "Pay us now or your little clothes shop will be made dust even before the bulldozers get here. You've been told."

It was like watching a movie, unreal. He watched Ashwin stand up, saw Satpal open his eyes as the door curtain swished open. Both men looked at the woman and three young girls who had appeared, huddling together. Satpal's family. Silence grew. Something in Ashwin's face must have made Satpal act. He was the only one moving as he wrenched away from the hands and threw himself upwards to rip at Ashwin. Ashwin, blood streaming from his nose, was slammed back against the house wall. Gathering his wits, he pushed his attacker back into the arms of Jemal and Gurinder. For a few seconds, Satpal stood hunched between the three men before they closed in on him like wolves at the kill. Run? Kick and punch with the others? He stayed where he was, watching.

It was swift and savage. Ashwin's head butt put Satpal on the ground, clutching his face to stop the blood. Then punches and kicks jerked Satpal's body as it sank towards the dust. The family's cries rose, the noise filling his ears and mind. It went on, until he knew that his moment to join in had gone. Finally, as he moved, his companions stepped back from their work, breathing heavily. Gurinder bent down by Satpal, looking over the cuts and bruises, listening to the moans and judging his work. There was a groan from the injured man, alive, and relief washed over him. He looked up, taking in everything. The whimpering woman and her children had gathered on the ground by their man. The three sweating gang members had taken a few steps away and were looking at him like he'd been caught stealing from them. Ashwin's voice was as cold as it had been with Satpal.

"I said I would be watching you, Manish. You weren't with us. You lost your nerve...again."

He tried to think clearly as he searched for the right words. "You didn't need me... I'll be there when we aren't fighting weak little men. Let's go." He stood and began to walk back the way they had come, feeling eyes on his back. Ashwin's voice stopped him.

"Wait, Manish!" The harsh sound made even the crying children look up from their bleeding father. Then, more gently, Ashwin continued. "Don't walk alone. We'll come with you. We must move quickly away from here now."

They jogged up the alleyway, not looking right or left. His mind whirled. Everything would be alright, the others just wanted to get cleaned up before hiding for a while. There would be another job and Satpal would be forgotten. He just wanted to escape, to be by himself. They entered the main passage. This part of the old city was still busy, it would be easy to get lost but he couldn't hide himself as quickly as Surbjit did. He could elbow Ashwin in the face and run, forget about the gang. No, the mind picture of that poor bastard Satpal was still too clear. That could be him. Anyway, there was still the chance of money. All he had to do was hide his feelings and speak loudly.

They were at the end of Enterprise Road where Ashwin lived. This man had passed in and out of his life over the years. Yet he knew nothing about him. Was there room for friendship in between the beatings? He tried to smile at him but felt the spit on his face again as Ashwin came close.

“You had me fooled, Manish. You’ve been full of big talk but I can’t see that you really want to be one of us.” He paused. “Mansoor will hear of this and we’ll let the boss decide what to do with you. He knows that we’ve told you everything, trusted you, and he won’t like being let down. Wait and see.”

He opened his mouth to speak. Then his breath left his body, the pain shook his insides. Ashwin’s fist had struck him deep in the stomach. Gasping, he saw the ground rushing up to meet him as his brain tried to work out what had happened. Pride, or some sense, made him thrust the palms of his hands on to the floor so that, through the pain, he held himself in a squatting position on his hands and toes. He wouldn’t let himself fall beneath their feet. Jemal and Gurinder began to kick his ribs from either side. The taste of blood in his mouth roused him and he started to lift himself amongst the blows, ready to throw at least one punch. Even Satpal had tried to fight. The beating stopped suddenly and Gurinder and Jemal held his arms. Blood throbbed in his ears and Ashwin’s voice came from far away. A scene of boys playing in river mud entered his head then vanished.

“That’s what it feels like to be my enemy, Manish. You’d rather be my friend, eh? Wouldn’t you rather have money? Think about this as you lay in your hut tonight.” Manish heard footsteps move away, then stop. “Oh... you’d better keep your mouth shut. I’m still not sure what to do with you.”

The pain was his whole body as he hit the ground, forcing himself to stay awake, to catch their words as they moved away. Alone, he forced himself to stand, staggering. His ribs burned, the pain in his stomach hunched him over and his left eye was blind. Home, he must get home. His place was not here amongst people who looked away and stepped around him. Moving forward, he pictured them sitting, waiting for him, the meal ready. His parents. Surbjit. Their pity and disgust. No comfort there. This wasn’t as it should be or as he’d hoped for. Pain and shame filled his throat, flowed down his face, and he changed direction.

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He was losing himself in the dark. Aching, bleeding, he moved as fast as he could to pick out a pathway through the crowd, flinching as the lights became brighter. His left eye, when open, gave him a painful blaze of colours. The flashing, liquor store sign was like another blow to his head lighting up the mad faces of street entertainers dancing for money. This was hell. Someone pushed him. He started to fall, saved himself, as two ragged men circled him like sniffing dogs. The lower jaw of the big one hung loosely, an empty sack of skin and bone; the other man was crawling, his arm held upwards, palm open like a grasping demon coming out of the ground. Space, he needed space. Head swimming, he kicked out to clear a way and felt his foot thud into the bent one's ribs. The beggars slid away as he fell beneath feet. No-one stopped. In that moment, he was no better than those who crawled in the street and hid in nighttime corners. He cried out, kneeling then standing.

He travelled on through the city's light and dark until he had to stop again. New buildings, open spaces, confused him. Nobody here would care if he fell again to rest but, each time his head slumped, sights and sounds jarred him awake. An injured dog, its leg at a strange angle, lay alone, yelping and writhing in the road. Spices and scents filled the air around him and, for the first time in hours, he felt hungry. Shame returned with thoughts of home. There was nowhere to go. Ashwin and the others would look down on him and there would be another beating, a worse one. Before, they'd let him go but, with different orders from above, from Mansoor, they could be hunting him. There'd be more than punches and kicks. Mansoor scared the shit out of him.

Surbjit could find him first and this was a good thought. His brother knew every inch of Magphur, old and new. Surbjit must not see him like this. He was still a hero, even if the way he'd behaved made him look foolish. If this trouble ended, then he and Surbjit would sit and talk like they used to. He'd see to that.

The surroundings had changed again. The lights were different ... pin pricks, moving and stabbing at him. It was late. Where was he? The sounds were not the known ones. The calls of the sellers had gone and

now there was the hum and grind of machinery. Brick walls were falling into dust, smashed to make space. New Magphur was being built in a hurry.

He stopped shuffling forward, his mind clearing, and realised that he was in a place which held memories. Acharya Square. So different now. His mother would bring them to visit friends here. What were their names? He couldn't remember the people, but he could remember how he used to reach up to touch the food and the clothes for sale. He looked around. The nearest line of houses had been broken in two. Now men in hard hats, rushed and climbed amongst the rubble, moved between the towers of joined girders and slid into nighttime tents as a break from the work. His hurting eye streamed, making everything dance. The dust was thick and dry on his tongue.

He tensed his body to move on to a place where he could be alone and quiet in the darkness. A place to rest like those men in their tents. Maybe spend the night if he could sleep. Suddenly, something warm and wet slapped him on the left side of his face. He cried out. Ashwin and the others were here! The pain was coming and he had to take it. Sinking, he started to crawl. The broken wall would hide him, it was big enough to lie behind, prepare for a fight. He touched his face. Mud. A huge truck bounced past, so close, spraying more filth. He laughed bitterly. He'd become part of the earth and no-one would find him. The rough stone wall supported his back, as good a place as any to stop.

His phone vibrated and he reached for the back pocket, ribs cracking as he moved. The blood had dried dark on on his jeans. The Nokia had survived, just. He wanted to speak to his mother, now, but it was Ashwin's name on the cracked screen.

We need to meet. Don't worry my friend.

Silent sobs shook him. He'd seen this message before. Ashwin had sent it to those he had to punish. How had it come to this? He was Manish, the man who would make easy money in the new Magphur to earn the love of his family and friends. But this new city and the people he ran with filled him with a fear he hadn't expected and which he couldn't hide any longer. Anger had driven him here: his father telling him to be

polite to customers on the stall, being treated like a pack horse because of his strength. Surbjit was a prince whilst he ... Ashwin had grinned at him, knowing his mind, and offered him good money for “kicking a few people who needed a lesson.” The words had been smooth, “Mansoor will be grateful and will treat your family well.” The money had come easily at first. All he had to do was watch and learn as Ashwin took people to the edge of death. He should have walked away from Ashwin’s words then, for after the first beating it was already too late. Then there was the killing which was always in his mind ... the way the man had looked into his eyes.

“Hey you! What the hell are you doing there? Don’t you know that you could be killed in this place?”

He lifted his head and tried to see. Through his tears and bruises, a short man took shape and moved towards him, splashing the mud and waving a stick angrily. Dirty orange overalls, a white protective hat on top of the turban, a voice made rough by shouting orders. At another time, it would have been funny. Pushing his hands, wrist deep, into the mud he lifted himself to sit on the low wall. Still the man came on.

“I’ve told you to move, you begging scum. Now ...”

Anger rushed through him, pushing away the pain. Gripping the wall with his right hand, starting to make a fist, he was suddenly holding a large, sharp lump of stone which had pulled away easily. Screaming, he threw it at the voice so that the force of his movement made him stand, panting. Then he was moving – running, staggering, crawling – away from the shouts and the screaming brakes. The world was bouncing in his sight again as he passed from mud on to concrete, leaving the building site behind.

He slowed, stopped, listened to his struggling breath, eye turning left to right. The working part of the new city, a place where he’d never been. The shopping mall was before him... a new one, open. No stalls here. Groups, families, passed through the sliding, automatic doors to buy things from behind glass windows. He looked away quickly, still hoping to lose himself in a place where the light could not reach him. People could see his fear and turned away. Ashwin could be watching him from somewhere close.

The fall happened quickly as he moved into a patch of darkness between buildings, away from the crowd. Tiredness and pain drove him to the stone floor and it slammed into his bruised face and chest as he landed. Blood began to drip and spread from his broken nose, but he lay there.

The Nokia again. He forced himself to sit upright, feeling a spreading panic as he looked at the shaking screen. Each word in the crooked square of light was like another kick.

Nice to see you. Stay there. We're close now. Don't worry.

He fell back, tasting blood and sweat. The night sky looked clear and peaceful. There would be no more running. Coughing, he turned on to his right side and allowed blood from his nose to run on to the concrete. From the shadows, the square was bright as sunlight. He saw himself again, young, running down to the sun filled mud to meet his friends. The beautiful, sticky stuff clung to his ankles as he moved towards the smiling faces. He laughed as they splashed him with brown water and pushed and shoved him because he was their friend. Then he was carrying Surbjit on his shoulders through the market place, making him laugh as he galloped.

He opened his eyes, happy at the thoughts. There was no more pain and he saw his friends running towards him, out of the light and into the darkness. Ashwin was leading them and he too was smiling.

Chapter Thirteen. Sanjay.

He sat at his desk considering the people which this murder case had placed before him. The large sheet of paper was covered in scribbled words, half-sentences, lines joining notes. His case map. There was the victim, Ralph Thomas. The name was written large in the middle of the words. Not much to be added here yet, for he remained a mystery in death. Old, dying, returning to Magphur after many years. Surbjit had told him this. Why had he returned? To die. Doris Seebold had been certain of that. He'd quickened his death by coming back. Nothing had been taken from the body. What had the killers wanted? Knowledge? Revenge? What had drawn Mansoor's killers towards him on that night? Yes, they were Mansoor's paid killers. No doubt about that.

Rajid Patel, a young idiot anxious to prove himself by mixing with criminals. He was nothing but a bully and it was easy to imagine him frightened, out of his depth. He could be pushed to kill, would pull the trigger to show his manhood, but then he'd whimper his innocence, probably blame someone else. Gupta could easily put fear into him in the interrogation room and, lately, seemed in the mood to do this to anyone. The sergeant would be given space and time to show his skills, alone with Patel.

Rhiannon Patel, quiet, scared most of the time, but determined to be a loyal wife. There was a type of strength in her. Questions: How had she become involved with someone like Rajid Patel? Would she lie for him? Would she see this as part of being a good wife? He circled the last question. That could be vital. That red hair was amazing.

There were the local boys: Sashi and Surbjit. Sashi's problems were clear and there'd been trouble in his life for some time. Panicked, anxious, ready to do the wrong thing because everything was falling apart. The cause was as clear and the symptoms just as obvious: shaking hands, darting glances. Hash. Sashi didn't have to be a victim, begging or selling cheap goods or food up a narrow alley; he had his own bus, had worked hard. The kid had borrowed, traded and hustled his way to a good life and now he was throwing it all away. Why? He'd find this out when the killer was caught. Sash was on the edge of this case, not

involved in death. He'd made a good start, talking about the passengers, but any other evidence he gave would have to be carefully checked.

Then there was Surbjit, moving in and out of the case just like he found his way around Magphur. The boy was sharp, observant. His descriptions of Ralph Thomas's moods and behaviour had been a great start. Even so, there could be something the boy had missed. Something that Ralph had either done or said which would give a clue about his return to Magphur. There were more questions to be asked. Besides this, the boy could be useful in finding out more with his eyes, his ears and his street knowledge.

The notes on Doris Seebold were closest to Ralph's name. Such a link seemed the right way of thinking. The image of her face had stayed with him: the unblinking grey eyes, the voice which did not seem to rise or fall, her carefully chosen words. One of the first things she'd said was that Ralph was a dying man. A strange thing to say so early in their meeting. She must have watched Ralph Thomas so closely as Sashi's bus had shaken through the streets. Ralph Thomas and this old lady were from the past, maybe it was in the past that answers could be found. Another round of questioning could tell him this.

The phone rang. Gopal. Quick answers would be needed. The Commissioner had been quiet for a while. The old man's untimely and untidy death had awoken him. There would be no opening pleasantries.

"Sharma! Any progress with the murder of the Englishman yet?" Gopal's voice was tense and abrupt, designed to cause discomfort in the listener.

"We're pursuing several lines of enquiry, sir." He kept his voice level and calm. This sometimes made Gopal angry. "Today I'll question again the last people to see Ralph Thomas alive. The people on the tourist bus."

"What the hell's the point of that?" Gopal's voice was becoming high-pitched. "You've questioned them already. You should now be considering definite suspects and interrogating them. I want this case finished! You hear me, Sharma?"

“Sir, I’m confident that ...”

“Where’s this famous initiative which got you the job, eh? Use your contacts, make arrests. I promoted you quickly and I can get rid of you just as quickly. Remember that, Sharma.”

The line went dead. The laughter rose in his throat and released itself in a loud roar. Then he sat quietly, thinking. He hadn’t heard Gopal so uncontrolled before; the call hadn’t gone as the commissioner intended. It had been too quick, too full of panic. The poor man had allowed stress to eat away at him. But his meaning had been clear. He closed his eyes to shut out the tiredness, to try and drag some energy into his body and brain. Difficult to do these days. The important thing was to remain cool, no matter what words Gopal threw. The threats had been pathetic, but there was no doubt that Ralph Thomas’s murderer had to be found. Gopal wanted this, but then so did he. Mansoor was still somewhere in the puzzle.

So where was he now? He had already made lists of suspects and of questions to ask them, now he needed to be aware of the problems which could face him. He returned to his case map:

1. Gopal wants the murder solved. Could interfere if case drags on too long.
2. Gupta starting to question my orders and may have to be warned. Need him with me.
3. Mansoor – difficult to trace. Increase surveillance in the new city.
4. Find out more about Ralph Thomas – his life, his past.
5. Surbjit? Could be useful ...

Was the last point a problem? Could be if he depended too much on the boy’s information. Still, there was something about him ... He threw his pencil to one side. Action was needed. He knew where to start. Go into the past and question Doris Seebold. She said that she was dying. Well then, no time to waste.

Gupta must get moving again, he would drag him along to The Park Hotel to start work on questioning the guests more closely. Each of those passengers could be hiding something. Everyone was. Yes, he would speak to Doris. Gupta would interview the hotel manager, ask him about the guests’ movements since the murder. That should keep him involved, make him feel important. Something would be uncovered. It was

worth a shot. Springing to his feet, glad to be active after so much thought, the sound of his own voice came loudly to his ears.

“Gupta!”

The sergeant walked slowly from the office next door, his face unsmiling, the stare like poison. Gupta would need to be handled carefully.

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Doris Seebold’s grey eyes were fixed on his face. The look was much more unsettling than Gupta’s – there was cold appraisal, suspicion and, yes, hatred. She was frail but looked capable of murder. Careful, not too fast. Gopal wants results but truth was needed.

Doris Seebold’s room was cool and shady, a corner away from the blasting, midday sun outside. Even with the fully turned up air conditioning, and the huge ceiling fan whirring above their heads, he could see that the old lady was weak yet willing herself alert. He admired her force. Her illness gave him no reason to shorten the interview. If he wanted the truth, he could not feel sorry for her and if she needed to be broken, well, so be it. Her dry, cracked voice carried no feeling.

“Can I get you something to drink, Captain Sharma? I tolerate the bottled water myself, but I can ring for some tea if you prefer.”

This was English politeness, not kindness. Those eyes remained directed at his face.

“No thank you, ma’am, but please allow me...” He reached forward to the low table between them, broke the seal on the plastic bottle and poured for her, holding her gaze as he passed her the water.

She sipped, rested the glass on the flat arm of her chair before beginning to speak in a tone which was surprisingly strong. “I’ve been expecting you to ask me more questions about this wretched death. However,

I really don't know what else I can tell you. The unfortunate man was simply a fellow traveller, nothing more."

"And yet, Miss Seebold, you must have observed Mr Thomas very closely..."

"Not at all, Captain. I simply saw certain similarities between Mister Thomas and myself. Both old, both struggling in the heat ... both reaching the end. When one is my age, there is a certain, shall we say, intuition. I observed everyone on that bus, not just Mister Thomas."

"You said that Mister Thomas was coming home to die. What exactly made you say such a thing?" He needed to break her toughness. How?

"I find that I can sense the proximity of death. I worked as a nurse when I was young. My observational skills are still sound, you know."

"You said also that you were doing something similar..."

"Before you ask, Captain, I have cancer, inoperable liver cancer. I am in the process of seeing the world before I die. I hope to be moving on very soon."

"Forgive me, ma'am, Magphur is not the easiest place to be right now – the heat, the crowds. What brought you to a city such as this?"

"My instincts don't always guide me well. When I was young, everyone wanted to come to India. You know, finding oneself and all that. Maybe my mistake has been to leave it all too late. Anyway, is this interview about me or about the deceased?" Her last words were spoken harshly and he found himself wanting to know more about Doris Seebold's past.

"The words you used about Mister Thomas were *coming home*. Was it your impression that he had been to India before, that he knew Magphur?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. He had his eyes shut most of the time and he spoke to no-one on the bus."

This interview would be difficult. She knew how to keep people at a distance. Then came the sound of her rattling, racking cough which pulled at her small body. He reached for the water bottle but she waved his arm away before falling back in the chair, eyes closed, her breathing heavy. He waited. Her watery eyes opened finally to focus on him as she sat upright. There was the hint of a smile, a challenge. She was expecting him to go. Breathing more easily, she spoke again, slowly and painfully, her voice an accusation amidst the gasps.

“Many men would have left me to my discomfort. Illness can be so embarrassing... Ask your questions quickly. I need to rest.”

Gradually, her breathing became more regular as he watched. Her strength was fading but it was still there. Her eyes did not leave him. She would not be broken in one interview, not this time anyway, but time was not on his side. Her eyes closed again, she would sleep soon. It was time to find out what Gupta had discovered.

“Ma’am, I have no more questions. I will leave you in peace.” He stood, bowed his head to her and walked to the door before turning to face her once more. “Thank you, Mrs Seebold. I’ve learned a great deal.”

He felt her eyes burning into his back as he opened the door to leave.

Gupta looked more alive than usual as he walked across the reception. Maybe he’d enjoyed the responsibility of his task, being involved. The big brute needed to feel important.

“Well, Amarjit. What have you got for me?”

He noted Gupta’s startled look at the use of his first name. After a silence, the answer came slowly.

“Sah, the manager, Mister Shastri, has given me a great deal of information. I think you’ll be pleased.”

“Well done, Sergeant Gupta. Tell me everything as we drive back to the station. I need your advice about something.”

Gupta’s expression was difficult to read. Pleased? Puzzled? Confused? Maybe a mixture of all these.

Chapter Fourteen. Surbjit.

He left his home to stand in the spreading dark. The day had gone well, on the stall and with some new clients who wished to see Magphur, yet the family meal had been a silent one. No-one had wanted to be cheerful. Manish was on their minds. He'd spent nights away from the house before but afterwards had always turned up to work on the stall – maybe late, usually tired out, but there. None of them wanted his black moods in the house, but no-one wanted him in danger. There was a movement behind him and, feeling his hair being ruffled, he turned to look up into his father's worried eyes. Quickly he brought the wooden chair. There was nothing natural to say and so they stayed in silence.

Many times he thought he saw his brother walking down the alleyway in the gathering dusk, but this was just hope. The two nights which Manish had spent away could be too easily explained – he was with the gang. He felt his father grow restless, watched as he stood up and shuffled painfully back into the house. Get some thoughts together. Manish had been angry before leaving the stall and had said many times that he was going to meet some friends. He'd argued with customers, thrown down a packet of bangles and swaggered off into the crowd. Work was much easier when he'd gone. His moods were of no use.

The stillness made him restless. Without thinking, he got up and started to run down the alleyway, anywhere would do. It was good to be away from the house's silence. Always better to move. Maybe the gods would be kind and Manish would meet him. This was the best time of day. Many people had finished work and were free to sit and talk. No time for that now.

Lungs bursting, he slowed down at last, leaning forward to put his hands on his knees. Still he scanned the crowd, alert, not allowing himself to be tired. The idea snapped into his brain. Sharma. He'd help search for Manish, and find him. Standing up, hands on hips, he looked around. The police station wasn't far from here.

He walked on thinking about what he would say to Captain Sharma. Going to the police could put Manish even deeper into trouble. No matter, it was important to find him. Maybe Manish was already in the cells. Anyway, even if Manish was locked up, at least the big fool would be safe from the gang.

Then he stood before the police station's open door. Moving through its pool of light, he entered the high, white room feeling very alone. The noise, the sights, wrapped around him straight away. An old man in filthy robes, bent double and supported by a twisted walking stick, was waving his free hand and shouting without stop at a dumb-faced policeman behind the desk. To the left, four men, staring straight ahead, covered in blood and bruises; a fifth, sitting, head down, suddenly sat straight up to show a crooked gash across his forehead. The man tried to stand, but weakness made him fall to the bench again. A group, gang age, stood in front of two policemen, shouting, swearing. The biggest policeman suddenly swung a long, white *lathi* and hit the loudest one hard on the shoulder. The crack made the noise stop for several seconds before it picked up again. A man and a woman – pale skinned with expensive, western clothes – stood in the middle of the room, close together, trying to shut out everything. The type of people who could pay him to show them Magphur. The woman held a handkerchief to her nose.

“Ruko!”

The voice sliced through the noise, created silence, and made him turn away from the couple to look at Sharma standing by the street entrance. The older policeman, the one who had come to his house, stood just behind him. Then he couldn't take his eyes off Sharma, the reason why he'd run here.

“Sergeant Gupta. Clear this area, get all these men into the cells. Deal with them one at a time ...”

The orders continued, clear and strong, and he watched Gupta organise men to push the injured, lame and drunk towards the lock-ups. The swinging baton stopped complaints. Captain Sharma made his way towards the western couple, his words smooth, and, without thinking, he stepped forward to place himself in front of him to look into his eyes. There was another order.

“Gupta! Escort this lady and gentleman to my office.”

He was alone with Captain Sharma. They moved to sit on the bench. The man with the broken head had left blood. Then he told his story quickly, getting rid of some of his worry: Manish was missing for the longest time ever, parents so worried, very afraid that he might be with the bad men, angry on the stall. Please help...

Captain Sharma looked at him, time passed and he managed to hold the gaze. The police station noise told him that Manish missing from home was one small problem amongst many big ones. If Sharma just passed him over to that fat sergeant, he would run back the way he had come. Then the questions began.

“Who are your brother’s friends? Who would he go to see? Do you have names?”

He felt his blood rise to his face, he looked down, feeling shame. The names would be people from his streets, people known to his family, and, here he was, telling the police! Manish had caused a bigger problem than he could know.

“I don’t know his friends ... maybe the gangs ...”

Captain Sharma’s voice was full of kindness.

“Don’t worry, Surbjit. You’ve told me enough. Be brave for your family now. We’ll find Manish.”

Sharma left him quickly, before he could speak more. A policewoman, maybe Manish’s age, stepped towards him, ready to ask more questions. No, enough talk. Sharma would take care of things now. Then he was running again, no matter where, through the streets. Hot, salty tears ran down his cheeks and into his open mouth. Why didn’t the police look for Manish straight away? He knew why. The station had been crowded like the street. Too much work to look for one missing boy. Captain Sharma would help, he was sure, but, in the end, it would be down to him, Surbjit, to search his city.

His house was still silent. There were no snores and he wondered whether his mother and father were watching him in the dark. No, they would have said something. Maybe they’d worried themselves to sleep. Manish’s mattress was empty. He hid himself amongst his own blankets and waited for daylight.

Chapter Fifteen. **Doris.**

The gentle knock on the hotel room door broke into her dreams of the past. She awoke sharply and gradually began to feel the breeze from the ceiling fan bearing down on her. It felt like she'd been asleep for ever. Turning her head slowly, she looked at the travel clock on the table beside her. Eight o'clock. Morning. She'd been asleep in the chair all night. God, those tablets were good. Too bloody good. Sometimes they stopped her thinking straight. Last night they had knocked her out, killed the pain for a time, but now she knew that her first movements would bring the familiar agony back to her limbs. Thankfully, her mind felt strong enough to face the day. Memories and dreams were for the night. She started to flex her arms and legs in preparation for getting up and steeled herself as the pain stirred. The knock came again.

Slowly, carefully, lifting herself from the upright chair, reaching for the walking stick which she used when she was alone, she stood upright. Gritting her teeth, she controlled her scream; the pain had to be beaten again. Standing there, rocking gently, she gained her balance before moving towards the door. The third knock made her lose her fragile patience.

“Alright! Alright! I’m coming! What’s the bloody emergency?”

The policeman suddenly returned to her growing consciousness and she stopped moving towards the door. He could be standing in the corridor now, waiting to ask more questions to catch her off her guard. Surely not. He'd only seemed interested in recent events and not in her, she was sure, and she'd keep it that way. He'd have to work for any information. Damn it! She hadn't meant to tell him about her illness. She could handle death. Well, his sympathy had taken him away, at least for a while, and given her time to think. But it had been a moment of weakness, nothing more. Answering the knock was another bloody mistake. She should have stayed in her chair, pretended to be asleep. Too late now. Breathing deeply, still swaying, she forced herself into a state of calm. Coming here, mixing the past with her present worries, that interfering policeman. The last few days had shaken her. Her strength returned suddenly, just as the doctor said it would, and she moved forward, face set to give nothing away.

The opened door revealed the white jacketed hotel porter holding a tray. Toast. Coffee. The breakfast which she'd ordered without thought the night before. The boy was so young. She glanced at his trained, nervous smile before ushering him towards the low coffee table to leave the tray. Today was a day when she might try to eat; she'd need the stamina. To hell with giving a tip, though. Waste of effort and money. She walked stiffly past the open, outstretched hand and heard, with satisfaction, the click of the closing door as the porter left her alone. Falling back into the chair, she began to gather her thoughts. Painkillers, water ... She went through the list whilst her brain was still active.

That policeman – Sanda, Sharma or such like – couldn't fool her with his politeness. He'd be back and, next time, he'd stay. She knew it. His eyes had looked right into her as though preparing an unhurried, systematic interrogation. He was playing a waiting game. Bloody idiot better not wait too long or he'd be faced with her corpse. She had to drag her rotting carcass away from the festering dung heap the city had become. Support was needed. Not medical help this time.

Images scrolled through her fevered brain: the lined faces of old friends. People who could give her what she needed. The humming motor of the fan became the background noise to another bout of drowsiness. Think, damn it, think! The mobile phone vibrated on the table and she thrust her hand towards it angrily. Seeing the name, she thought for a few seconds, before swiping her index finger across the screen as she'd been taught back home. Sound natural, speak first, be in control.

“Ah, Tony, good of you to call. Excellent timing. I was about to phone you.”

She relaxed as Tony's clipped, English tones came to her.

“Doris, old girl, how are you? Heard you'd been trying to get in touch again. Left you a message. Are you meeting us for drinks tonight. My place. Remember?”

“Of course I remember. Not too far gone yet. Been looking forward to it. It'll be good to clap eyes on you at last. In fact, I've a favour to ask you. More than one in fact.”

“Sounds most intriguing. What are you after, eh?”

“Tell you more later, Tony. Will the others be there?”

“Course they will! It’ll be quite a gathering. Just like old times.”

Wincing, she searched for a way to end the conversation. “Well, not so many of us left now ...”

She waited for the throaty, crackling laughter to subside. Christ, Tony was still smoking those filthy cigarettes. Probably holding one between his yellow fingers right now.

“I’ll send the car for you, my dear. Nothing but the best service for Doris. Seven o’clock, sharp.”

“Until later, Tony.”

She pressed the red phone symbol on the screen. That was enough conversation. Breakfast first, then another sleep before changing. It would be good to get out of the loose fitting, linen shirt which she wore most of the time. Getting a bit grubby. Must look her best tonight, there were favours to ask.

The congealed butter stuck in her throat and the toast grated the inside of her mouth as she chewed. The cool coffee was strangely soothing. She thought wistfully of her lost appetite and remembered the spicy food which she once enjoyed. No chance of eating any of that now. Tony would know better than to serve her any local dishes this evening. She settled back in her chair once again, eyelids drooping. Tonight she would be surrounded by her remaining friends. They would give her the one thing she needed now. An alibi.

*

Her reflection shocked her. The sleep had been long, refreshing, and she’d somehow expected to see a better version of herself in the mirror. She had taken time over her appearance, applying the make-up carefully and slipping on her favourite blue dress which had once hugged her figure. Now nothing could hide the sickness, the touch of death. The face was still pale, drawn and lined beneath the powder, and the dress hung limply. Good job she’d shoved the long sleeved one into her bag before leaving home - it hid her arms’ hanging

skin. Swiftly, she pulled the matching shawl around her shoulders and throat. Christ, she hated watching herself wasting away. She detested bloody mirrors now. It wasn't cold, yet she shivered before her reflection. Yes, she expected to see signs of illness, but did she have to look like this, even when dressed up in her best clothes? The final insult. Damn that doctor! He'd given her clearance to travel. He must have known that the journey would bite into her. She remembered, smiling grimly, how she'd tried to charm him, then pressured him: a sentimental return to the place of her youth, a wish not to die in bed. She'd broken the young man's professional resistance and he'd waved her, and his responsibility, out of the consulting room. She stepped away from the mirror as swiftly as she could. Nearly time to go. Anyway, to hell with it. She didn't expect any of her evening's companions to look much better.

The room telephone rang loudly, making her jump. Picking up the receiver, she took in the information without reply - Tony's driver, sent to pick her up. The porter, bringing and taking away the breakfast, had been the only brief company all day. Lifting her slumped shoulders, preparing her mind, she walked to the door. The corridor smelt of dust and she lifted the corner of her shawl to cover her nose and mouth. Christ, she needed a drink. Tony would ply her with alcohol, just like the old days.

The lift doors whispered open and she saw herself again. Another fucking mirror! No point in looking at decay. Again she turned her back on herself as she descended. She walked steadily into the crowded foyer and, after tossing her room key on the reception desk, made her way towards the main door preparing for the heavy stillness of the evening heat.

The driver bowed respectfully as he opened the passenger door. This was a good start, nothing wrong with old fashioned politeness. There would be no conversation, or a tip. She'd just sit in the back of the car saving her strength for later. Settling back into the soft leather seat – Tony always did have style – she looked out at Magphur. The lights of the open fronted shops moved past the window as they had done many years before: glinting clothes, trays of food, bowls and bottles of alcohol in the beer shops. The car slowed as it met unhurried crowds. Plenty of people to look at and study. A man with an empty eye socket thrust his grizzled face against the window, mouthing something or other. She turned away, closing him out, as the car

jolted to a halt. Strange, such a sight would have moved her once. Feelings faded as the end approached. She dug her nails into the car seat and opened her eyes. This mood wasn't needed, not this evening.

“Get a move on, driver! Let's get there. I'm dying of thirst.”

That was better. Fighting talk. She leaned back, satisfied with her words, as the car surged forward amidst an outbreak of shouts. Soon she would be surrounded by friends. Their young faces swam through her head again against the backdrop of planks, ropes and canvas sheets of the slums. Her place of work. The past. She'd learned so much from the children she'd been sent to teach. Their determination to survive their lives had shaped her and she could hear them now – chanting, demanding, laughing. She'd laughed with them, long and hard, many lifetimes ago. The nights had been spent with him. That was before the chaos of the fires which had burned in these streets when many of those same children had screamed. She let those scenes take over her mind.

Where the hell was this? Time had passed. The road was clearer and she could see that the landscape had changed. There was space, less traffic, and the lights of tall buildings broke up the darkness. This new city had shimmered distantly in the the heat haze during the day, she'd seen it from the hotel and wondered at its strangeness and size. This was a Magphur which she couldn't recognise. All this, risen from the fires and dust of the riots. Like a phoenix. Good God, what a load of poetic crap. Save it for the funeral.

“How much further, driver?”

“Ma'am, it is nearly time to stop.”

She took one more look at the strangeness outside, then moved her thoughts to the meeting ahead. A meeting with people she hadn't seen for over thirty years. Those who'd stayed on. Three left. Tony, Amanda and Jonathan. Would they recognise her? Care about her? Tony would. Letters and parcels had travelled between them over the years. Later there'd been the emails, but they weren't the same. Ripping open packages in London had made her fingers reek of Magphur. She'd often smelt the thin paper, picking it up from where she'd dropped it, before sitting back in her living room, remembering. Rachael, always so

damned anxious to help, had sat in front of the computer with her revealing old friends' lives: news of work, family lives and then illnesses and deaths. All very clever and useful, but a computer couldn't give her the "Parfum de Magphur" and so she'd keep bits of packaging. This puzzled Rachael, made her laugh.

"But, Mum, you're always swearing about the place. You hated it, didn't you?"

"It's a part of my life, Rachael."

It most certainly was. No-one could ever understand how big a part it was. Anger set her mouth firmly as she recalled how the carefully prepared Magphur stories, saved for Rachael when she was old enough, had been met with yawns and rolling eyes. No interest and hardly any questions. That daughter of hers had been more concerned with whichever boyfriend was draping himself over the furniture at the time. Rachael had made her own mistakes with men. Plenty of men, plenty of wrong choices. Just like her. Maybe she should have told Rachael about ... She almost had on several meet-ups when there'd been just the two of them. Then the illness had taken over her life and cut across any confession.

Rachael had changed for a while - been more attentive, stayed longer in the flat – but the silly little minx had never really listened to her. More concerned with her own husband and children who took all her time. Still did. God, she should try bringing up a kid alone! In the end, Rachael had disappeared for ages to "make things work at home." All that, the loneliness of the flat, had made the decision to come back to Magphur so much easier. Christ, it had been hard listening to the girl howling, promising to be a better daughter, offering, ridiculously, to travel with her. No, she'd keep on the move until the end, searching for the best parts of her life. The car jerked to a halt, making her wince. About bloody time.

"Sorry about the long journey, ma'am, the city is busy tonight."

Tony had been constant. If his letters and emails were anything to go by, he'd not really changed. She could always imagine him speaking the words that he wrote. His words of "undying love" had become more ridiculous as the years passed. What would he think when he saw her? She'd been told by someone that you never noticed your loved ones growing older. They always looked the same to you. She'd found that to be

true, up to a point. It was herself she hardly recognised these days. This place didn't feel like Magphur. Coming here had been a mistake.

Then she saw the house. Plucked from her dreams, unchanged even though its surroundings were so different. The stone blocks, each with a lion's head, still stood at the entrance to the short drive. The wrought iron gates, automatic, could well have been the same ones, but they hadn't opened by themselves in the old days. She pressed the button to lower the car window and the building's façade loomed over her. Tony'd done well to keep this place. Always the businessman. Breathing more rapidly to calm herself, she took in the colonnade of four pillars flanked on each side by six high, narrow windows, each one well lit as though this was an evening event for many people. There was a time when it would have been.

He stood at the top of the steps, in front of the solid oak door. Tony. The survivor. A sharp crack of nervous laughter flew from her mouth when she saw the crumpled white suit. God! He was wearing white that night...the night he tried to jump on her when they were alone. It was the hardest she'd ever slapped anyone. But they'd both ended up laughing and he'd never tried again, although he had tried to get round her with words. The car door opened and she saw the driver's arm there to support her. The performance could begin.

She clenched her teeth and stood upright, ignoring the driver. Think yourself beautiful, Doris, and to hell with their sympathy. Tony was waddling uncertainly down the steps, his smile fixed. Difficult to tell what he was thinking.

She saw him pause. Then his eyes travelled over her in the same way, although not in the same way, as they had done years before whenever she entered the room. Suddenly, she felt his arms around her, clinging to her, to life. She felt something warm on her cheek and his body heaving gently. Was the soft old fool sobbing? He pulled away and faced her, dabbing at his face hurriedly. She could have spoken his words with him. Same well mannered greeting, although she heard the quiver in his voice.

“Doris, darling, you look as lovely as ever.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Tony. Just give me a drink.”

He held out his arm to her and she took it, no question of pulling away this time. She needed him. Slowly they moved towards the steps. He spoke again, much more firmly this time.

“Come and meet the other two. They can’t wait to see you again. They’d be here now if it weren’t for these steps.”

Her words stopped his laugh. No point in waiting, she’d be exhausted later.

“Lovely, darling. Though, of course, it’s you I’ve come to see.” She stopped, saving her energy before climbing, turning to face him. “Tony, I need to speak to you about Ralph.”

“I knew that you would. Look, I’m sorry about the news. He was ...”

“Never mind all that, Tony. The point is, I saw him. Just before he died.”

“Well,” he said at last. “When the others are in bed, you must tell me everything. You’ll be staying the night, of course.”

They began their climb towards the house. Tony’s voice, now calm and controlled, had reminded her of why she’d come to him for help.

Inside, she looked around. The room was the same. Its atmosphere wrapped itself around her like a familiar blanket. Tony pulled the chair back for her and she sat down at the table, feeling safe for the first time since her return. She turned to face her friends, smiling, blinking once to fight away the tears.

Chapter 16. Sanjay.

He looked down at the damaged, lifeless face and breathed deeply, growing calmer. His first sight of the murder victim had shocked him, just when he thought his feelings were worn out and dead. The sheet had been pulled back to reveal a young face which was familiar. It was Surbjit ... and then it was not Surbjit. The body lay a short distance from where it had fallen. Smears of blood, some almost handprints, formed a trail. The phone had been stamped on, shattered, its parts kicked across the ground. Mindless.

So, the young man hadn't died from the beating straight away, but had tried to crawl to the wall of the office block. Maybe the killers had watched him. Almost there, he'd slumped onto the shiny paving stones to cough out his last breath, probably as the new day broke. A post mortem would give more details, if there was time for one. Questions crowded: How many attackers had there been? How many witnesses? Had the shoppers simply turned away? Where was Gupta with any information? Then he knew exactly who was lying at his feet. Manish.

Gupta was at his shoulder with his flat, dead voice.

"Sah, I can't find anyone who witnessed the fight. None of the shopkeepers saw anything."

He swore under his breath. Not even an old beggar to speak to this time. Mansoor came into his mind again. Careful, not so fast. Look for evidence. Speak to people and get Gupta working. Make a start.

"Sergeant, you know this boy?"

Gupta stooped to pull back the sheet. Yes, "boy" was the right word. The face, although cut and bruised, was an innocent child's with no sign of anger or fear. Such feelings were in the past.

"I've seen him working on the market and he runs with those others. There's a file on him at the station. With a photograph. I think his name is Mukesh, or maybe Manish. He's the brother of that boy who came to the station ... Surbjit, the one who met the Englishman."

Gupta couldn't manage to hide his boredom. But he spoke the truth, leaving no lingering doubt. When the scene was checked over, he'd have to tell the family. Then there would be another mortuary visit. A positive identification. More paperwork, more combing the area for witnesses. He thought again of Surbjit's visit to the station, saw those eyes and heard the pleading voice. Other cases had drawn him away. He'd done nothing except used his soothing voice. Kind words to Surbjit, to the parents, wouldn't bring Manish back.

Nodding to Gupta, placing him in charge, he began to walk. The police van would come, the attendants would cart off the body, the blood would be washed away when forensics had done their job and life would return to normal. But this place would always be a murder scene – just like the small square, with its fire, which came to him in dreams. There'd been several of them, Manish had stood no chance. The beating had been savage. This was a murder and not a warning which had gone too far. The type of murder which Mansoor could have ordered. His style was all over this like fingerprints.

Noises drew his attention and he looked up at the skeleton building. Amongst the girders, the gaping floors of the top levels, lights moved. There were people up there, workers who slept amongst scaffolding and beside tools which they picked up every morning to start work. No time was wasted travelling and no earning hours lost. He'd climbed dusty stairs without bannisters and shaking ladders months before to interview a suspect who'd probably pushed a man to his death. No witnesses, case unsolved. Everyday things had showed the business of living: sleeping bags, hammocks, small cooking stoves and toilet buckets. A working community in the sky. The morning was already full of machinery noise and traffic, everything changing as he looked.

“Gupta!”

His sergeant turned away from talking to the police doctor and, shaking his head and sighing, moved steadily towards him. The man was a slug this morning, moving only at his own pace. The next few minutes

would wake him up. He kept his welcoming smile before moving his gaze upwards. Gupta's eyes widened as he picked up the meaning.

"You want me to ..."

"Yes, sergeant. There's always someone ready to admire the view. It could be that you'll find a witness up there. Someone could have seen what happened."

Gupta's horror remained. "But no-one will speak. They'll all be too afraid."

"The workers come from all areas. They travel. They may not be so afraid if they're going to move on. It's worth a try. Give me your report this afternoon."

"But, sah, it's too high ... too far away to see faces or anything. No-one could tell who ..."

"Sergeant Gupta, I don't want to know who but how? How did these men go to work? How did they kill? They have their ways. Each gang hunts differently. If anyone was watching from above, I want to know what they saw."

"But, Captain, what if ...?"

He cut short Gupta's next protest by turning sharply away. This part of the job was done. Now he needed to think, to prepare his speech to Manish's family, during his walk back to old Magphur. He wondered whether Surbjit would be at home or in the market place.

*

Pushing through people, his mind moved from Manish and into the past. Not now, not now! No time for such thoughts. He thrust angrily at a food vendor, moving the man out of his path, as though this action would rid him of the images. Once he would have nodded and smiled at known faces as he walked. The mind pictures came. He saw a young boy running in the darkness, weaving a path between the reaching hands. The flames casting mad shadows on the closed windows and doors. He heard the desperate gasps

drowned by the rasping, cruel laughter of many mouths. He saw himself, standing, watching. Had he laughed too? The memories had changed over the years. He'd made them change. Change them again! Change them now! Do something! Think of Manish. Of Surbjit.

But the main picture struck him with a wicked force and he stopped walking, unaware of the passing bodies brushing against him. The boy was staring into his face, pleading for release. Mansoor was there, the lathi falling again and again until there was a bloody mess. Always the same ending. Shaking his head, he came back to the present. Someone was speaking to him, urgently. What the hell...? Aware now, he saw that he'd gripped an old, stooping man by the shoulders, stopping him from passing. People had stopped to watch him ... fearful, mocking. Without a word, trembling, he released the old man and broke through the ring surrounding him. He'd told weeping families about death before but this one was different.

*

Surbjit was sitting in front of the stall, the morning's work done. The way the boy's head was moving from left to right, scanning the crowd, showed that he was looking for someone, perhaps waiting for someone to take over the selling. He drew closer to Surbjit. Often the receiver of bad news would learn from the messenger's expression and fewer words were needed. This wouldn't take long. He thought of Gupta, climbing, sweating. Maybe he should have climbed the building instead. That was action. Easier to handle.

Surbjit turned to him, no sign of the smile. The people, the calls, the traffic were there and yet a silence seemed to gather around them. He opened his mouth to speak, but it was Surbjit who spoke first. The voice was surprisingly calm and controlled so that he felt a tug of relief and, yes, admiration. Surbjit was already a man.

"Manish. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes." Just one word, after all those which had tumbled through his brain on the way from the death scene.

“Who killed him?” The question was hard, controlled and he felt its force.

“We don’t know ... yet. But I’ll do my best to find out.” Another empty promise. He’d told Surbjit that Manish would be found, safe and alive. He’d told Gopal that Ralph Thomas’s murderers would be brought in. There was nothing to show for these words. Surbjit’s voice was still strong.

“I know who did it.” Anger made Surbjit stand up. “The ones who were his friends...from the river. I can show you...”

“Surbjit,” he said calmly. “First we must go and tell your family. They must see Manish. Help me now. Come, we’ll pack up the stall. Then take me to your family. No time for tears.”

And there were no tears. They worked together silently: rolling down the stall’s cloth cover, putting all the unsold goods on the handcart which Manish had pushed so often. Later, as they pushed towards Surbjit’s house, he noticed that the crowd parted more readily for them as though sensing the sorrow. Surbjit stared straight ahead.

“When I’ve spoken to your family, Surbjit, tell me everything you know about the men who knew Manish.”

*

Seema was sleeping soundly beside him. When his own sleep started to come, the scene in Surbjit’s home drew him back. A different type of nightmare. The women had torn at their clothes, held each other, before moving around the room escaping the father’s attempts to comfort. The neighbours had come so that the small living room had filled with sorrow which soon spilled out onto the street. He’d left quietly, unnoticed. During his walk home he’d been surprised to find himself shaking. He’d seen the cold, controlled side of death – the testimonies, the alibis, the smiling lies – but this time the emotions in the house had been so raw. He knew that many parts of the scene, so clear in this moment, would fade from his mind in time.

He'd force himself to work, to forget. But he also knew that one feature of those moments would stay with him for ever.

Surbjit hadn't cried but had watched the scene, seeing and probably remembering every detail.

Chapter 17. **Gupta.**

At this second he hated Sharma with a force which made his hands hurt as he gripped the shaking ladder, taking care not to slip on wood worn smooth by many feet. Stopping the climb was just as painful, everything seemed to sway around him. He spat clumsily and watched the gobbet fall through space between the huge frame of metal and bamboo. Far below, people the size of his sons' toy soldiers were making their way into the malls and offices, past the uniformed officers keeping them away from the crime scene. An ordinary working day. But not for him.

“Sergeant, are you alright?”

He looked down past the tremor in his left knee and into the smiling face of Constable Sunil Pradha. Sharma had sent the boy to assist. If swinging between posts and platforms, before turning to look at him with sympathy, was assistance then the boy could rot in hell. Pradha moved now, ignoring the ladders, gripping the poles with hands and shins to move up and look down. Maybe a fall, a broken arm or leg, would shatter that damned confidence. The workers – some stirring from their dangling hammocks and blankets to brew their *chai* before starting their shift - offered claps and approving laughter. Those who had already started work had downed tools to lean on the parapet to watch the sideshow. A challenge, another insult to him. Enough.

An order came into his head and he barked it out. “Constable Pradha! Take statements from every man on that level. Go no higher. You understand me? Stay where you are until I tell you to move.”

He was pleased to see Pradha's smile vanish and the watchers disperse. They could hate him all they wanted, but he wouldn't listen to their laughter any more. Pradha would be a good cop in a few years, if he could stop wasting time. He could tell the young man about wasted time! Now move, concentrate, don't look down. Just two more levels to go. There were fewer workers up there and the questioning would be quicker. This was pointless. Just another box to be ticked to give that bastard Sharma still more credit. The ladder began to shake again as he continued his climb. Reaching the next platform brought relief and it was

even better to stand on the one above that. Good to stand and look down on Pradha questioning the men, to see the blank faces of those who'd seen nothing. No surprises there. Whatever Sharma had said about many of these workers not knowing Magphur, not being afraid, they weren't stupid. The gangs had already been at work, spreading their threats. There'd be fear up here.

Forcing himself to stand tall, clearing the sweat away from his eyes with damp fingers, he looked around slowly. Twelve workers on this stage – he'd hoped for less – all busy, none looking at him. He could make up interviews, tell Sharma that someone had seen a group running but had been too high up in the darkness to pick out details. Nothing to report. This was the most likely outcome anyway. Less effort to sit up here and recover, to look out over the morning haze, picking out familiar landmarks while he still could, as others worked around him. Two men carried a large board and lay it flat before covering it with grey cement mixture. One poured water whilst the other mixed slowly with a spade. He thought of the wall he had built in Himachal Pradesh, the type of job he enjoyed. Simple, no need to worry about things he couldn't change.

“You look in need of a rest, sergeant. Difficult climb?”

The man walked easily across the shivering boards. He was tall and dressed for work; the loose fitting shirt and grey trousers, showed many days' dirt and dust. This was no ordinary worker. A Sikh. The turban, although grimy, made him look important as did the fierce eyes and the black, square beard. This look was a prepared one, a tool of his trade. Every part of this man's face seemed to be giving a choice: say why you are here or go.

Something about the man made him want to use the authority which he'd let slip. He started to speak, coughed and croaked as the dust squeezed his throat, was angry when he saw the Sikh's smile. The words came eventually.

“I have some questions concerning a death in the new shopping mall last night.” He pulled his notepad and pen from his back pocket, relieved that they had not fallen out on the way up. “Your name?”

The voice was deep and proud, the gaze still challenging. “My name is Chatha Singh. I’m the foreman at this level. Sergeant, it’s not safe for you to be here. When you have asked your questions, I will get one of my men to guide you to the ground. There’s a small lift three floors down. Visitors can use that.”

He would not look away from the foreman’s eyes. “Last night a boy was beaten to death in the square below. Did you see or hear anything?”

Chatha Singh snorted. This man was dismissing him, beginning to turn him away! Pradha’s voice came from below, loud and demanding. Right, Sergeant Gupta of the Magphur Police Force would ask all the bloody questions he wanted and there would be answers too. Control the anger, Gupta. Use it. Remember how Sharma does this, making people feel the power behind the words.

“Sah, this is a murder enquiry. I will have your answer and there must be no doubt. Were you here last night and did you see anything below? Late?”

The Sikh’s fading smile satisfied him. It didn’t take much: a change of tone, a look. The reply was thoughtful.

“I was here last night as I am most of the time. My men sleep near their work. We’re ahead of schedule...” The words showed pride. “We worked through most of the night. I saw nothing from my place.” He tilted his head to indicate, to his left, a wooden box, about knee height, which acted as a desk. On top of the desk were some papers weighed down by a yellow hard hat. “Many things happen down below, sergeant. We aren’t part of the city up here ... not yet.”

“I must ask your men the same question. Please call them together.”

The firmness of his voice pleased him, but for a moment he thought that Chatha was going to refuse. Slow seconds passed before the order came.

“Challo!”

The twelve men downed tools and came to stand with heads bowed. Older, white bearded men mixed with boys; all wore the grime of long, hard work. He waited for attention. Slowly their heads lifted so that they looked at him, their expressions showing nothing. This time he would break the silence, at least one of them would give him information. He'd find something out before risking his life on that ladder again. Make your next words sure and certain, Gupta.

“Last night, in the new shopping area below, a boy... no older than some of you... was chased, kicked, beaten to death. Did any of you see anything, anything at all, which might help us to find out what happened?”

Then came the silence which he feared. He spoke again.

“It doesn't matter how small or unimportant something may seem. Anything could help. Did you see anyone being chased? Did you think it was just young men playing but now you can see it could have been more?” He scanned the faces hopefully, feeling the time passing, the sweat trickling down his back.

At last came Chatha's deep voice. “Last night my men were either working or resting, sergeant.” The hard look at his men showed his control. “There'll be more money if all this is finished by the end of the month. And now there are jobs to be done. If there are no more questions ...” He could sense satisfaction, triumph in Chatha's words as if this silence was the only thing to be expected.

The torment returned. Another failure? At least you tried, Gupta. Go, walk away. Try to keep your dignity. Some instinct made him speak again. “My name is Sergeant Gupta. You can contact me at the police station in the old part of the city if you remember anything.” Then there was an idea. “There's a reward for any information.” There was satisfaction that he had spoken the last word. But as he turned towards the ladder, Chatha's voice was there.

“Remember to use the lift, sergeant, or get your young colleague to help you down.”

He felt, rather than saw, the quiet laughter as the men turned their backs on him to work again. He started back down the ladder, feeling sick. The wooden platform was level with his waist when the young man spoke quietly.

“Was it the gang?”

The sound of the words seemed to come from a distance so that he went down one more step before he noticed the speaker chipping at a small square of concrete. The noise had covered the muttered words and he wondered whether he’d really heard anything. The boy placed himself well, unnoticed by the others. The question came again, even more quietly this time.

“Was it the gang?”

His senses came alive as he began to take in details. The boy was small, wiry, the type who often worked at jobs like this. The dust of the building site was all over him making him part of the surroundings. The eyes in the powdery face darted everywhere, checking that no-one was watching. The expression showed a fear that his repeated question was already two steps too far. The forward jerk of the head indicated that the descent must continue. He made his way down the ladder and, looking up, saw the boy following carrying a bag of small stones.

Then they were together on the platform below and he was looking down into the face, alert. Not so many workers here. Good. Laughter below told him that they were in the middle of a break period. Not much time. Chatha, with that voice, would be pushing them back to their tools soon. He felt a tug at his sleeve and then the worker was leading him to a boarded area covered in sleeping bags, blankets and rumpled sheets overlapping. A place for working, eating, resting and watching your surroundings changing every day. The question was thrown yet again.

“Was it the gang?”

“We think so,” he said quickly, still gasping from coming down the ladder. “What can you tell me?”

“I saw the death. He was on his phone. He should have kept moving. They hunted him like a dog. He was already weak. They stood around him, beat him till he fell. And when he stood up they beat him until he fell again. He tried to fight back but there were too many of them. Four.”

“Where were you when you saw this? Were you up ...?”

“No, I had gone down to the place beneath the scaffolding. Sometimes there’s a man who sells food and beer there...but not that night. Couldn’t sleep. I was starting to climb back up when I saw them. I hid and watched.”

“What did you do after? When it was over?” Small questions first. Build up the witness’s confidence before finding out the important details. Sharma always worked this way, watching the face all the time, making a mental note of every change of expression.

His questions had touched something. He saw the look of guilt before the words came quickly again. “I climbed back up here to my place. Got into my bag.” There was a need to get rid of the memories of the death night – a night when this young man had chosen to hide, not help someone being kicked to death in front of him, before climbing to safety. He hoped that this honesty would bring some peace. Chatha’s voice came from somewhere on the tower. There were more questions to ask.

“You asked about the gang? Do you know who they were? Did you see any faces?”

The eyes stopped moving then and looked directly into his own. There was danger in these questions. A few seconds thought, a quick look around, a decision, then the voice was quiet but firm.

“I know it was the gang. The ones who work for Mansoor. The beating, that is the way they do it. I’ve seen a killing like this before.” The voice was angry, there was no chance of stopping now. “I’d recognise that way of moving anywhere ... Gurinder.”

“Are you sure ...?”

“He killed my brother ... five years ago. In the same way. He made me watch. Now I want to finish him.”

He thought quickly, “Your name, what’s your name?”

“Balbinder. They call me Bal.”

Then he was standing alone, staring at the quivering pole up which Bal had climbed so quickly. Exhaustion filled him. Still, the information would please Sharma. But then why were that asshole’s feelings so important? Breathing deeply, he turned away and thought of the long haul down. For some reason, this worried him less now that his mind was busy. After getting down one ladder, he began to look around for the lift which Chatha had spoken about.

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On the ground there was no sign of the covered body. Sharma was waiting by the police car with two young constables. He told Bal’s story quickly: the link with Mansoor, Gurinder, the way the murderers had worked on their victim. Why was he so pleased when he saw Sharma smile, obviously pleased with his findings?

“Well done, Sergeant Gupta. Just what we need. That was a difficult job I gave you. You needed more men. We must move swiftly now, get this Bal in for a statement. Give him protection.”

He eyed the scaffolding again. Surely Sharma didn’t mean ...? Then he saw the two constables moving towards the building. The laughter made him look round.

“Don’t worry, Amarjit,” Sharma was saying through his smile. “You’ve done your bit. Let the constables do the hard work this time. Give them twenty minutes. We need to get something to eat quickly, then talk about what’s next. This witness will lead us to Gurinder, then to Mansoor and then we’ll find the Englishman’s killers. I know it!”

Walking beside Sharma into the covered food market, he looked around at the square's painted marble floor and the glass fronted shops. The place was busy, getting busier with each second, faster paced than the old city. Too much for him. Then again, maybe not after this morning's climb. Okay, he'd been lucky to find Bal but getting up there, asking the questions, had been real policing and a step forward in the case. Sharma was speaking again.

"I made a mistake, Amarjit, I didn't expect you to find out so much new information. If I'd sent more men up with you we could have brought our witness down straight away. He seems a bit slippery for just one officer to handle."

"Perhaps Constable Pradha could have done that he ..." There he was again, laying himself open to doubts, giving Sharma a chance to compare him with a younger colleague. Of course, he should have called Pradha to help him get Bal down the ladders. The heavy mood began to seep into him again. Then Sharma's laughing words surprised him.

"Pradha? Don't talk to me about that idiot, Amarjit... After work, we'll visit him in hospital."

"Hospital, sir?" For some reason he felt that his spirits were about to lift.

"Yes, Amarjit. Whilst you were up there doing your job, Constable Pradha was falling from one platform to the next. Showing off. Thought he could move around without using the ladder. Broke his ankle and had to be hoisted down. He'll be no good to either of us for a few weeks. We'll be working even more closely together now."

He laughed with Sharma, his body shaking. A feeling he hadn't experienced for a long time. Yes, he'd like to see Pradha, to smile before telling him that the case was progressing well.

Chapter 18. Rehman.

He lay on his sofa, satisfied with everything. The enquiries, the gathering of informants, had gone well and he knew that he wouldn't have to worry about Mansoor sending men to call at his home or at the office. Even worse, they could meet him in the street. That had happened before. No, he could tell anyone now that he'd made best use of his special talent. Team building. Getting people to work in ways which suited him. That was the way it worked in the office and also in the life which Mansoor had put before him. His secret life. Well, most people in Magphur had one of those. At least his paid well.

The mid morning sun spread from the window of his apartment. It was hot and he was glad of his new linen suit and the silk shirt. They always gave him discount at Fab India. The assistants liked him there, he was generous and regular with his tips and gifts. A man in his position needed a large wardrobe of clothes. Being seen entertaining rich clients was the life blood of his exclusive legal business and he liked to be seen mingling with wealth.

Unfortunately, entertaining in the less salubrious corners of the Magphur social scene was also a requirement these days, but this was a much less public affair and he didn't want to dwell on these matters for too long. It had taken him all morning to talk to the two men, both scum and both so desperate for money. He wouldn't have the balls to do what they were going to do. He could destroy people with his brilliant courtroom performances but that was face to face. These men spied in dark corners. At least with him there was a show of professional honour. Of course bribes played a part behind closed doors, away from the glamour of his front page cases. Such was life. Now more than ever. He liked how he could shut away the dirty side of his work and become respectable. Another of his skills.

He ran his mind over his latest "alternative project" – a term which he liked. Mansoor wanted Sanjay Sharma served on a plate. No reasons were needed. Sharma was a persistent pain, had a record of success putting criminals away and used rules and regulations according to his needs. The rumours about his methods and about his past were strong. So far he'd led a charmed life but it was just a case of waiting for his first big mistake. Cracks in the image would appear soon simply because they always did. Sharma and

Mansoor had a history of bad blood between them. The details of this didn't interest him, he just followed instructions like any good lawyer. Sharma would only have himself to blame if he was brought down through his own carelessness. That was where the two scumbags would play their part.

Sashi. The driver. This one had problems and was heading for more. Business failing, reputation fading, home life falling apart. Then there was the hash. Stupid young bastard had blown some of his earnings, just for kicks, and now he couldn't stop a habit which was taking his money and killing him slowly. Sashi hadn't been difficult to find. One of his many helpers had done the trick there, put out a few feelers, dug up a bit of past. Sharma knew Sashi, had helped protect him. Strange way for the young guy to repay a debt, dishing the dirt on a friend. He hoped Sashi would enjoy the money – however he used it.

The second rat provided an even more interesting case. This one had found him. What was his name? He consulted the sheet of paper on the coffee table. Sunil Laska. Old. Police informer by trade, although he clearly wasn't fussy how he made money. Ah, but the man's breath had truly stunk, face thrust forward, coming up to him just as he'd been getting into the car. They'd found a quiet corner of a back alley to talk. The old man had gone on and on! He knew Sharma, knew him well. Knew someone called Gupta too, Sharma's right hand man who also hated the captain. Interesting. Would only be too glad to end Sharma's career, or worse, the old man had said, and would hand over any information that was asked for. Worth a try. He smiled to himself. Sharma was surrounded by people out to get him. He almost felt sorry for the man! Anyway, all the hatred in the air would make his job much easier. This would be a quick project, he felt. Might as well just sit back and let Mansoor's money fall into his lap. All he needed to do was to see to it that the two informants were gently prodded, reminded of the work they had to do. Such people had a habit of disappearing quite suddenly in Magphur and he'd need to keep tabs on them.

He sat up, yawning, and looked at his watch. 11 a.m. He felt like an early lunch. Not a restaurant this time. Those were now places of work. No, he would send out for something and eat it in the apartment where he could plan his moves. Only one thought troubled him now. He was working more and more with criminals. He'd always been discreet and knew how to hide his less desirable contacts. But Mansoor was

becoming part of his life, much more so than he'd expected. Like a lot of thugs, Mansoor wanted to look respectable and an association with a smart lawyer was useful with this. Okay, they could help each other, but this link would be difficult to break. Mansoor clearly enjoyed meeting him and, worse, being seen with him. Anyway, he would apply his brilliant legal mind to finding a way of ridding himself of the man and moving on.

His phone vibrated his jacket pocket. Damn! Ignore it? No, it could be the office with something urgent. He pulled out the phone, the screen told him the worst. Mansoor. He could change his mobile number, that would give him peace, but he knew Mansoor was not ready to let him go yet. The bloody man always wanted him at lunch time and he ended up sitting, listening to the low-life scum talking and talking.

"Rehman, my friend. You're well I hope. I'm downstairs. Listen, stay where you are, I'll come to you and we'll dine together in your beautiful apartment which I am helping you to pay for. Ha! Don't worry, I haven't come to collect money. No, no! But you must tell me where you are with this Sharma business. Ok? Don't go away. I'll be with you soon."

As the door bell rang, he began to prepare his performance. The conversation would be painful and degrading. This forced friendship was killing him slowly, even if the comforts of his life kept him smiling.

Chapter 19. Surbjit.

The sunlight was moving across the patched mud wall. He'd been staring at it for hours, not wanting to move. This room, the pain stirred by his brother's empty mattress, had held him prisoner during the week since Manish's body had been found. There'd been the funeral ceremony. The ashes had mixed with the glinting sunlit patches on the smooth, brown water before being covered with garlands and petals. The chanting would always be with him in his emptier life.

The only other time he'd stepped outside, he couldn't remember which afternoon, was when he'd simply wandered the streets talking to no-one: forgetting his customers, ignoring the greetings, keeping away from the sorrowful, tearful eyes. He wanted the world to get on with its business and leave him alone. Another trader could have his stall, making money could wait for a while. At home, his father's lifeless words occasionally filled the space as he lay on his mattress.

"Surbjit, you must eat."

He'd tried to obey his father, bringing the food to his mouth before dropping it back into the bowl beneath his blank stare. Time was like a slow moving dream of faces and sounds which meant nothing. Then, one voice made sense of all the madness. His father was weeping loudly and this shocked him, making him sit up. The words might have been part of a longer speech, but one point struck him.

"Surbjit! Come back to us. One lost son is enough. I need you to be a man now..."

After that, thoughts and plans became more real as his home took shape around him. There were two people in his head, one known, the other a shadow: Captain Sharma and Ashwin. There was room for only one emotion, anger, and he wanted to use this feeling. He fired a quick glance at the three members of his family - Mukesh standing over Bhawna, and dadiji, huddled in her corner. Suddenly, his father's words echoing in his brain, his patience was short. Still he stared at the wall, its surface rough like the maps the teacher had shown him at school, but his mind was full of action – things he had to do. His voice, when he spoke, sounded clumsy and unfamiliar.

“I’ll be back...”

The sunlight hit him hard after the gloom inside. Only the third time outside in a week but, this time, his mood was different. Sharma. He had to find Sharma and plan with him. The police station was the first place to look. People moved aside easily as he ran and dodged as before ... thinking, thinking. His instinct for getting around quickly was still there.

Then he saw him. Sharma, there on the steps of the police station. Meeting him was meant to happen. Slowing to a walk, he went to stand by the steps, looking up. Sharma had seen him straight away and not taken his eyes from him as he approached.

“Surbjit,” the voice was calm and measured, “How are you? Your family ...?”

“You said that you’d come. That we’d talk about the men who killed Manish.” His breathing was under control and his voice was strong. He could speak about the murder.

“Surbjit, these things take time. You should be with your family now. I can’t ask you to ... help me with my enquiries. Not yet.”

“You’ve already asked!” The anger was rising. It was good to see the stab of surprise in Sharma’s face.

“Alright, I want to ask you some questions. Are you ready to answer them?”

“I’ve been ready for a long time! I can tell you where to find the murderers. That is, if they haven’t run away whilst you have been sitting in your office.”

It was difficult facing Sharma’s hard stare but he was a man and would stay strong. Sharma’s words came quickly, as though he’d made a decision.

“We’ve picked up some suspects, people you might know. I want you to come with me and look at them. Tell me if you recognise anyone. You won’t be seen.”

He felt the firm hand on his shoulder. Maybe Sharma was still angry. Difficult to tell as he let himself be guided out of the sun, up the steps and past the desk where a group waited. The next room, the office, was cool, the street sounds far away. A chair was placed for him and he watched as Sharma took a thin folder from a drawer and opened it on the table. This was more like it. Photographs were spread across the desk, like a fan. New pictures, each one showing a face. He knew these men, had spoken to two of them quite recently. All of them had watched his stall greedily from a distance, no longer friends. Empty stares which gave nothing away. When he was small he'd wanted to run through the river mud to join in these big boys' play. They were gods then, now they were no more than cheap goondas. They'd made Manish suffer. One of them had struck the last blow. Sharma spoke.

"These men were seen in the new part of the city ... with Manish. Fortunately, not everyone is afraid to speak. Tell me which ones you know."

He'd hoped for this. Maybe it wasn't the pain which he wanted to give these killers, but it was a start. Perhaps he'd feel better afterwards. He reached forward quickly and jabbed the photograph of Ashwin's face, twice.

"This is Ashwin, the leader. If he didn't kill Manish then he made the others do it." Speaking fast, he thrust his arm forward again and turned the remaining two pictures to face Sharma. "This one's called Gurinder and this is Jemal. I've seen them many times before... with Manish."

He slumped back in the chair, suddenly tired. So simple. He didn't feel any different. His troubles were the same and Manish was still not there. Sharma's eyes looked right into him, his face difficult to understand.

"Good, Surbjit. That was the first step. Now there's something else you can do for me. Are you ready to help?"

"Just tell me what you want."

These words cheered him. He was offering to move, to act, to forget about all this thinking and talking. Sharma looked thoughtful as he gathered up the photographs. Even as he spoke, he looked as if he was thinking of something else, planning what to do next.

“We picked up these thugs two nights ago. It wasn’t difficult. They were careless ... thought they were safe from us. Strange, one of them – Jemal – he cried when we put him in a cell with the others. They’ve been identified, not just by you. We’ll keep them there now.”

The phone rang and he watched Sharma pick up and wait before giving swift orders. Another problem in a different part of the city. The talk ended and Sharma’s eyes were on him again. A decision had been made.

“Surbjit, I want you to spend more time in new Magphur. Watch and wait but don’t go looking for danger. I’m asking you to find information ... nothing else.”

There was excitement in these words. But he needed to know more.

“I’ll give you an address, a place to watch. Spend no more than a few minutes in front of this building, then move on. Go at a different time each day. Sometimes just run past and look quickly. Never behave in the same way twice. Stay in the crowd. You can do this better than any of my men.”

He smiled. This was better. Life was returning. The things that Sharma wanted him to do were part of him anyway. Watching for chances to make money and help his family, staying just ahead of danger. Still he wanted more.

“But what will I look for? What do you need to know? How will all this help find what happened to my brother?”

He watched Sharma reach into his desk again. Another photograph. The man in the picture was laughing, moving towards the car, sharing a joke with the driver who was holding the door open. This face was different. More cared for. The body was fat, bulky, full of power like the bear he’d once seen tied to a pole

in the market. The animal couldn't run, could only move to the end of the rope. Still it was dangerous, lashing out with its claws at anyone who dared to go too close.

“But, who is this? Has he got something to do with my brother's killers?”

“Mansoor. For many years he's been a big part of crimes all over Magphur. We'll find a link between him and Manish. I'm sure of it.”

He was puzzled, confused. This Mansoor lived in a different world. What did he have to do with old Magphur or with Manish? Facts were needed. He wanted to see the three men in the cells taken out and punished. That would be simpler ending. Sharma wasn't telling him everything.

“Surbjit, you must trust me in this as I am trusting you to help me. This is no job for a fool. By doing this, by watching as I've said, you'll be helping me to find justice for your brother ... and for others.”

He stared at Sharma before speaking. The silence was long.

“I'll do this thing for you. But first I must see Ashwin, Gurinder and Jemal. I want to look into their faces. In the cells. Just once.”

It was as though his earlier confusion had been passed across to Sharma.

“But why would you want that? You've identified them and that's all I need. There are many prisoners sharing their cell. If we have to release some of the others, any one of them could say that they've seen you here. Word could get back to Mansoor! This would spoil ...”

“Then let me see them in a different room. Captain Sharma, I must do this.”

A long silence. Then Sharma stood up and led the way.

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He stood between the fat sergeant, Gupta, and Sharma and looked down at the three men behind the bars. They were sitting on the narrow wall bench. Ashwin, Gurinder and Jemal. Broken men making no attempt to look tough. They'd been taken from their cells and brought to this room with its one hanging light bulb, dark stains and smell of shit. Their faces were bruised and dead. Good. Gupta's voice barked.

“Stand up!”

The three stood and their dull eyes looked at him but saw nothing. To them he was just another street boy. Jemal's body shook as he cried for himself. Gurinder bowed his head, unable to look at another face. Ashwin gazed straight ahead, his expression showing nothing. Could any of them remember a time playing in the river mud by the ghats? They'd killed their own lives by kicking Manish to death. Strange, the hatred flowed away from him as he gazed at them. Waste! He turned away, sensing that Sharma was close behind him anxious to end this scene. Then they were in the corridor. Sharma must have read his thoughts.

“Surbjit, don't feel pity now. Those men killed Manish. They chose wrongly and must pay. Believe me, I know something of this. And I know the man who is even more guilty than they are. Help me bring him down. Remember your brother.”

There was no doubt now as he turned to face Sharma and he needed no more knowledge. He made his voice strong.

“When do you want me to look at Mansoor?”

Chapter 20. Doris.

She hadn't been able to rest. Lights from the street danced on the ceiling and she thought of the Bhangra dancing she had watched many times and later tried to learn. He'd laughed at her efforts. They'd both laughed a lot then. Noises from outside came to her. Stiffly, she reached across to the bedside table to look at her watch. Three o'clock. Christ, she was usually dead to the world at this time, the medication was losing its grip. She'd need a stronger dose tomorrow. The three or four nights of eating and drinking downstairs had played havoc with her routine. Still, it'd been bloody good fun, like living in the old days. Tony's way of doing things – his talk, his views – hadn't changed much. The old stories were still there, they just needed dusting off. Everyone laughed in the right places. It was like entering an old, cobwebby room where she hadn't been for years – frightening and comforting at the same time. Tony was attentive, didn't want to let her go, she knew that, but she would have to be out of here soon.

The bedclothes felt heavy, clinging, and a burst of heat arching through her body made her tense. Not a good sign. The day ahead would be difficult. Pushing the sheet down to her waist was a struggle and she lay there panting, hoping for sleep. Much better without that weight. Her eyelids began to close at last. In her fitful sleep, he came to her again. It was as though she was standing somewhere in the darkness watching her own girlish figure move, watching the past. She felt his body close as they lay there sweating in the morning greyness. He started to leave her, to go back to his own bed. She'd wanted him to stay for a while longer, but some moral sense he'd dragged from home made him return to his room for the last few hours of night. There was the gentle touch of his lips on hers. She spoke his name.

“Ralph.”

The unearthly, lilting voice made her open her eyes and once more she was wide awake. The call to prayer, closer here than in her hotel room, was familiar and had become no more than irritating. It would stop after a time. She wanted her dreams again. The silence, when it came, was like a release from pain, except that the pain was still growing steadily. She needed peace, she needed those damned pills. Lots of them. She moved her hand towards the table again.

The plastic bottle rattled, fell, and the tablets spread across the floor as the stab of pain arched her back. Keep breathing, breathe. You've been here before. No need to panic. Just keep calm and it will pass. Christ, it's hot. She focused her eyes on the painting on the far wall, the one she loved, showing a tiger at bay with its teeth bared against the hunters' spears.

"Ralph!"

That was a stupid, pointless call. No time for the past, girl, you're in the here and now. She summoned her strength again.

"Tony! Tony!"

The hand was on her forehead, and quiet tones soothed her. Not the voice she wanted to hear, but it would do for now.

"It's alright, old girl. We're all here for you ... all your friends. Here, drink this. You'll sleep again."

The cool liquid passed between her lips. People were watching her now and this helped her get a grip.

"No bloody doctors, Tony. Had enough of all that. Just let me rest. Yes?"

"Anything you say, Doris. I'm here, I'm going nowhere. There's nothing else for me ... anywhere."

The calm spread and the pain subsided. It would come again. But for now she felt herself drifting away from it. Hell's teeth, old Tony must have given her a huge dose. Typical of him. All or nothing.

She needed to talk, to tell somebody something. Damned if she knew what it was, but it kept dragging her back from sleep. During the waking moments, as the light spread across the room, she struggled to think clearly until the welcoming darkness took her again. Was that her own voice she could hear? What words escaped her? How much of her tale was she telling? Tony was there.

"Rest now, old girl. I'll bring him to you."

Bring who? Ralph?...

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The sleep must have lasted for several hours. She awoke the first time to find the room bathed in late sunshine, the street sounds muffled. Another time her eyes opened and she saw the policeman's face. Then everything disappeared. He was still there in the evening light much later. Strange, she didn't feel surprised or displeased to see him. She worked hard to remember his name. Shanti? He returned her gaze, waiting. Tony's voice was somewhere. Sharma. That was it. Tony spoke again.

"It's Captain Sharma, Doris. You asked to see him."

She couldn't remember hearing anything but it didn't matter. It was so near the end anyway. Somehow, seeing him there made her feel at peace. She wanted to tell everything to someone and it seemed better to speak to a man she barely knew. She looked at the uniform, then more closely at the face, feeling her senses sharp and heightened. Must be old Tony's drugs. This man was no angel and he had a past... like her. There was damage, just below the surface, but she somehow felt that he'd understand her story and use it wisely. Difficult to tell whether it was trust or desperation which made her feel this way. She could speak to a priest or a holy man, she supposed. But no, reality was better.

She felt the heat all around her, and a strange silence. Sharma was just sitting there waiting for her to speak. She'd expected questions. Well, it was time to gather her strength and to get things moving just one last time. Tony was there, he was always there, especially when he wasn't needed. Her voice rasped, not too unkindly she hoped.

"Tony, be a good fellow. Sit me up, then bugger off and get some rest. You've been up all night. You look like death."

Tony did as he was told, once again. She could read his sorrow and his love. She'd put his feelings through the wringer over the years and tonight was no different. Certainly the old fellow's eyes were

glistening as he turned away and left the room, walking unsteadily. Don't fall back into all that mush, Doris. Sharma's here, in this moment. Be brave.

"So, what can I do for you, Captain? This is the time at which I usually brave the streets. At my time of life it's so important to keep active."

Sharma smiled and bowed his head slightly. Respect from the police! Well she could live with that, if only for a while longer.

"I understand, Miss Seebold." The voice was low and it soothed her. "I must apologise for interrupting your routine. However, I must ask you some more questions about Ralph Thomas. How well did you really know him?"

She felt surprised. The moment which she'd been waiting for had come quietly. It was too ordinary, too routine. Surely the unburdening of guilt should cause more suffering. She sensed that it wasn't just the morphine which gave her peace. The next question broke her thoughts again. Sharma's smile had gone, he was doing his job.

"Miss Seebold, you told me that you sensed Ralph had come back to India to die – that he had come back home. I think you know more about Mr Thomas than you have shown."

"I have lived with death for a while, Captain. With the idea that I ... could go at any time. Ralph...Mr Thomas ...looked wasted...resigned. The state of his health was clear to me when I saw him."

She saw Sharma opened his mouth to speak again. No, damn it, this was not going to be an interrogation or just another line of enquiry. She was in charge now. This was the time to tell him of her past. A confession, maybe. But she sure as hell would not be guided through it. She looked directly at Sharma. There could have been worse sights at the end of a life.

"Young man, I want you to listen very carefully to what I'm going to tell you. Make notes if you must, but don't interrupt me with any more of your questions. We both know that there's not much time."

It was gratifying to see the policeman again bowing his head. She needed that dignity, that space, at this stage. Taking a deep breath, she began.

“Captain Sharma, I knew Ralph Thomas many years ago in Magphur. Indeed, we were lovers. Don’t look so surprised. This body wasn’t always so wasted, you know ... Had one hell of a time in this city.” She paused, Ralph was there again. “Anyway it was the late sixties, still the time when young people came to India to ... er... find themselves. Ralph and I worked for an aid organisation ... helping to build schools, hospital work, that sort of thing. Hell of an adventure for a couple of teenagers. This part of India was very different back then.” She laughed. “We thought we could change the world but it was us who changed. Hope that’s not too much of a cliché?”

The coughing fit came as a surprise. She drank quickly from the glass which he offered her, drops spilling on to the front of her nightdress. That didn’t matter now.

“Anyway, d’you know that Ralph and I actually planned a future together - marriage, babies, house, all that sort of thing – when our urge to do good works had passed. At least, I thought we were planning it all together. I knew very soon that most of the planning was mine. He was in a very different place...”

Another silence. A short, bitter laugh.

“If you were to ask me at what point he changed, I couldn’t tell you. Even though we were here together for fifteen years. I believed we’d grown up together, but I rather think that Ralph Thomas was never fully with me. Maybe he was for a short time. Over the years, I’ve come to think that he wanted far more than me or the pittance which charity work brought in. By the end, he obviously felt he’d been selfless for long enough. He’d done poverty and it bored him. Wonder what he thought of the new Magphur?”

“Go on, Miss Seebold.”

She didn’t mind such prompts, they kept her alert. Sharma’s softly spoken words would keep her going.

“Then came the night of the riots. I can see that you’re too young to remember The Magphur Riots of ‘83, but you’ll have heard of them. All hell let loose, right across the city. We watched it from our room. Fires everywhere. Part of our own building caved in. We tried to save it. Formed part of a bucket chain. Suppose either one of us could have been shot at any time. Didn’t think of it then, of course.”

“Were you together throughout that night?”

The pain came again, just a prod this time, but not enough to make her stop the story. She’d gone too far just to give in.

“No. Ralph had been standing next to me as we tried to put the fire out. Then he was gone. Can’t remember how long I stood there, frantic with worry, wondering what to do. My arms were aching passing all those damned buckets. There were people still inside, screaming. When the fire cart finally arrived I broke away, started to run through the streets. Those people, looters, were grabbing things rather than saving people ... Then I saw him, Ralph, moving towards me through the crowd ... He’d somehow managed to make his way back towards me. Instinct, I suppose. I didn’t have to go far.”

“What was he doing? Was he ...?”

“He was walking, slowly, not looking at me. Eyes staring straight ahead. There was blood, lots of it, pouring down his face. Then he collapsed into my arms. I could have been anybody. I held him. Cradled him like a baby. Then I dragged him, God knows how, into a nearby temple. He suddenly started struggling, like a madman. Then he was quiet until morning.”

It was time to rest again. The story would continue. She closed her eyes, listening to her own breath. When she was ready to carry on Sharma was still there, smiling gently.

“For days I nursed him whilst they cleared up the mess around us. Strange, I was happy then, in the middle of all the death and mess. He was mine. I went on and on about our plans, our future back in England. He grew strong enough to smile, but didn’t speak much. He was moving away from me all the

time, even when we were so close ... He'd probably have left me during the rioting if he hadn't run into trouble. Then I told him. I was expecting his child. I must have thought that this news would keep us together. Two days later he was gone. Must have been lying there planning his escape. I think Tony must have helped him. Wanted me for himself, you see. Never owned up to it even though I questioned him hard. In the end I just had to get on ... Anyway, never saw Ralph after that, until ..."

Sharma leaned forward and she heard the words, "Tell me, Doris." The deep voice seemed to seep into her brain and she breathed deeply for one last effort.

"I saw him, of course, on that bus. An old man. I never believed in Fate until that moment. Both in Magphur at the same time, both close to death. Christ, you couldn't make it up! I knew him straight away, but he looked right through me, just like the night of the riots. No, before you ask, I'm certain he didn't know who I was. Not until ..."

This was the moment when everything felt most real. Real, in spite of the numbness caused by the drugs and by the distance of time. Looking into Ralph's old eyes was the moment which she would take into the final sleep.

"In the hotel. The night before I met you. I went to his room. No words. Nothing. I just stood by the door, looked into his face. We knew each other. That was enough ... I think I saw his guilt."

"Over leaving you? The child?"

"God, no! I was the past and he would have cared nothing for my daughter. I can see that. No, it was the night I lost him during those riots. I believe that, whilst he was out of my sight, he did something terribly wrong... I could see he'd been through some sort of hell. So many people did evil that night. Total madness."

"Doris, what do you think happened during those missing hours?"

“Something which brought him back to Magphur, Captain Sharma. You must apply your detective’s skills to finding out what that was. I can tell you no more ...”

Job done. Tiredness, deeper than ever, suddenly filled her. Sharma knew everything about her time in Magphur, well all the main events anyway. Difficult to describe the feelings she thought she’d shared with Ralph. The rest of her life, all the struggles, nothing had been as important, or as real, as those days . Where had Ralph gone? The question had always been there but over the years other things had seemed more important. Until now. Always bloody unanswered questions. She’d hoped to tie up all loose ends but it was too late for that.

She fell towards sleep then and watched Sharma’s face moving into the distance. Ralph came to her again. Maybe this time he’d speak to her and make everything clear and complete. It was a hope.

Chapter 21. **Gopal.**

There had been no progress. He needed facts. Something which showed that they were close to catching Ralph Thomas's killers. He threw the file to one side. By all accounts, Sharma was following all sorts of leads, none of them clearly linked to the old man's death and none of them logged or reported clearly. Bloody man was following his instincts again, trying to solve the murder of some goonda in the new part of Magphur. Nothing of importance. If the street scum were fighting amongst themselves, killing each other, so much the better. Crimes like that could always be hushed up before the tourists got wind. Statistics could be changed, harmful headlines could not. The last set of journalists who had caught him outside the building had made him too uncomfortable with their damned questions. He needed to talk to Sharma again. The knock on the door roused him.

"Come!"

Kapil entered, right on time, with the papers he'd asked for. He could always rely on Kapil to do things quickly like the damned good assistant he was. Saw everything, said nothing, did as he was told without question. In these times, that was important. Never smiled, though, and that made even him feel uneasy sometimes.

"Thank you, Kapil. Look, get Captain Sharma to my office as fast as you can. It's most urgent."

"Sir, Captain Sharma is already here, downstairs, he wishes to speak with you ... about a very important matter, he said."

Hell! Sharma always did the thing you least expected. Less time to prepare his anger now. No question of sending him away postponing the interview. That would look bad. Kapil's eyes didn't change as they looked down at him. Calm authority was needed.

"Good! Even better. I need a full report from him. Hold my other appointments, take any calls and see that we aren't disturbed for the next half an hour. Send him up."

“Yes, sir.”

Kapil’s face showed no feeling as he turned back towards the outer office closing the door quietly behind him. He never knew the man’s thoughts but he knew he’d be discreet. At least he hoped so. It was difficult to watch everybody; there had to be trust – for a while. Shuffling papers, making his desk look good, took up the next few minutes. This always helped him to organise his thoughts.

At last, after a double knock, the door swung open again and there was Sharma walking towards him. Say what you like about him, this officer knew how to present himself. The uniform was faultless, the stride purposeful, the smile calm and direct. Such a look had to be carefully thought out, there was no evidence of a life started on the streets. He had a clear picture of himself in his first uniform, proud, but he pushed the thought away.

“Ah, Captain Sharma,” he said coolly. “I was about to send for you. Sit down.”

Sharma moved easily. He didn’t look anxious or hurried. There was a good show of confidence. The first words spoken would have to break this mood. He leaned forward.

“Captain Sharma, I’m not happy with the lack of progress in the Ralph Thomas case. Two weeks have passed and we are no nearer finding the murderer. Your reports contain little or no definite information and I hear that you are giving your attention to other cases.” Stand up now, look down at the man, show power. “I’ve told you that I expect this case to be given the highest priority. Do you understand? The highest priority! Answers must be found. How close are you to a result?”

He leaned back. Seconds passed. The silent treatment had worked over the years. There was the sound of his own breathing, as though he had just run up a flight of stairs. Sharma’s smile had widened slightly.

“Sir, I must ask you to be patient and calm. Believe me, I fully realise the importance of this case. I’ve come here, unsummoned, to give you my thoughts.”

“Damn it, Sharma, it’s not your thoughts I want! It’s results, man! Can’t you understand that?”

“Sir, I know who was responsible for the murder of Ralph Thomas. I also know that, if we catch this man, more crimes will be prevented.”

Sharma’s tone made him listen. He nodded for the report to continue.

“I believe that this case gives us the chance to bring down the gang leader, Mansoor. Sir, I seek to prove that Mansoor set his thugs on Ralph Thomas to kill him for something he possessed, either knowledge or something of great value. The deceased knew Magphur well. He was in the middle of his final illness, we believe, and he chose the city as a place to die. He’d lived and worked here many years ago and his death was linked to that time. Mansoor, I know, saw to it that he died even sooner than expected. Whether Mr Thomas gave his murderers what they wanted, I don’t know... yet.”

“What did Thomas have that was so important?”

“Again, I don’t know. But I’ll find out.”

“When did Ralph Thomas work in Magphur? How long ago?”

“He worked here for fifteen years, for an aid agency, and left at the time of the riots. You must remember them, sir.”

Yes, he could recall them easily. He covered his thoughts with another question. Memories could be unpicked again when Sharma had gone.

“When did you find all this out? There’s nothing in your written report. Am I supposed to guess what’s going on?” His tone had no effect on Sharma. The calm voice continued.

“There was another traveller, Doris Seebold, around the same age as Ralph Thomas. She was in Magphur at the same time as him. They were intimate. Lovers. She told me a great deal about him. We need to check certain details and then I’ll confirm everything in a full written report.”

“Check your details today, Sharma. Now. Where is this Doris Seebold? Can we get hold of her quickly for further questioning?” Then came a thought. “Could she be in danger? We don’t need the death of another British tourist.”

“Mrs Seebold is no longer in danger, sir. She’d been ill for a long time and died in a friend’s home last night.”

“Do you think her evidence was reliable?”

“In my experience, when someone is dying their last words are usually reliable. I believed what she told me.”

Enough of this! Sharma was doing everything at his own pace. Things needed moving along.

“Captain Sharma, give me your report by the end of the afternoon. Bring me right up to date. I’m taking a personal interest in this case and I want to know everything. You understand me? For the time being, forget your hunt for this Mansoor. Now I want the man who pulled the trigger. The killer. Get back to the streets, find the man! In my day, we didn’t waste time. The first target was always the man standing by the body. Clear the streets of crime before you go inside the buildings. Now get out!”

Sharma’s smile stayed as he left the room slowly. Sitting down, he reached for the bloody man’s file. Some carefully worded lines were needed describing how he’d summoned Sharma in to demand results before setting new targets and a time scale for catching the killer. He knew how to word it.

He wasn’t fooled by Sharma’s calm certainty, something was happening in that mind. So many officers had cracked under the strain of policing Magphur and he sensed that there could be another one soon. Stress, burn out. Good reasons for getting rid of someone. The obsession with Mansoor was worrying. He’d never thought that a man of Sharma’s class could be so determined.

He picked up his phone to arrange a meeting.

Chapter 22. Surbjit.

He looked up at the tower's glinting windows and wondered whether coming here had been a good idea after all. The sun was high. Without taking his eyes off the shining glass he moved to squat more comfortably on the street corner. On his way to this place he'd noticed that fewer people recognised him - that was good - and those that did, the ones who caught his eye, moved away quickly as though he carried a smell of recent death. Well, that suited him. No time for more sympathy when there was a job to be done and he needed to be left alone. Still, this Magphur was not his place, no matter how many times he came here. The shops which he had walked through on his way - once getting chased out as he took a short cut - were not like market stalls. They shut out the sunlight. Everything here was bigger, like on the movies he used to enjoy when Manish was with him.

Mansoor's place had been quick and easy to find, Sharma's directions had been good. That Sergeant Gupta had followed, hiding in the crowd, obeying Sharma's orders to look after him. What a joke! No wonder he hadn't been sent to watch for Mansoor. The man was so easy to see, even in a place this full. Let the fat one watch him for there was nothing he could do about that, only ignore him. Gupta slid away after an hour.

Again he shifted his position and kept his eyes on the office door across the busy road. This was getting boring. Had Manish passed this very corner on his last journey? Had he been thinking of his home? Why hadn't he tried to make it back to his family? He shook his head, getting rid of these thoughts. Five more minutes, then he'd walk round the block. Sharma had told him not to stay in one place for too long. People didn't remember your face if you kept moving. There were not so many of his kind in this part of the town.

"Hey, you! Move away, now!"

Looking right, he saw the uniformed policeman was striding towards him, taking the hanging lathi from his belt. He cursed loudly. A rule broken on the first day of watching. His thoughts had held him here too long. Making his legs into springs, he burst away from the shouting and away the staring eyes. The

policeman was fast. The breath was close behind. Then he was falling onto the smooth floor, waiting for hands to grip him. Lying there, he felt the body passing over him. Looking up, winded, he took in the bits of the scene. The ground felt smooth. He waited. Then he knew that the policeman had jumped over him, raced into the crowd and was holding a boy, younger than him, by the collar, hitting him with his stick. A man was picking money from the floor. A pickpocket, caught. He felt relief for himself and pity for the cries. The thief must have hoped for some good stuff but hadn't been quick enough. The policeman didn't hold back, wanting people to witness the punishment.

No matter how much the police swung their lathis, there would soon be more thievery here. It had to happen. Not everyone had the money to live in those glass towers and soon people without fat wallets would seek a share of the wealth. The noise of the beating continued as he moved on. Keep awake and watch, Surbjit!

Taking care not to wander too far from Mansoor's office block, he explored the streets. A stranger in his own city. The running visits he had made to this place hadn't prepared him for this. He thought of the nights he had stood by his father listening to the sounds of the distant building work, watching the lights moving in the darkness. Manish had been there too. Now the scaffolding disappeared into the sun and dust as the world changed.

Then, without warning, Gupta's face was looking down at him, the sun behind. He jumped, startled. This place was messing with his mind, making him slow. A hand on his right shoulder kept him in place. The voice was kindly, different from the one he had heard in the police station and on the street. At least there was no uniform to draw attention to them.

"Surbjit, be calm. We'll go for a drink together. No point in just walking around."

"Why are you here?" The anger was in his voice. "I can look after myself. Doesn't Sharma trust me?"

Gupta's silence was hard. The stare made him look away.

“It is *Captain* Sharma. And he’s given you a job to do. Come with me. You’ll be on your own soon enough.”

The area around the small, open-fronted shop was crowded. Gupta went to buy chai and some food whilst he stood by the street table, suddenly feeling hungry and thirsty. The hollow feeling in his gut must have been with him for some time. It was like he was waking from a long sleep, getting to know himself all over again. The mourning days had changed him, dulled him. Get sharp again, Surbjit!

Gupta came to stand close, bringing gushtaba. They shared, chewing silently. The sight of Gupta pushing food into his mouth made him angry. No point in the fat fool being here making them both noticed. The question flew from his mouth.

“You hate Sharma don’t you. Why?”

Gupta stopped eating – surprised, shocked - and looked down. There’d been no time to think about the words. The voice was shaking, very slightly.

“Why ask that? Anyway it’s not your place to ...”

“I’ve seen the way you look at him. When he’s speaking ...”

“Shut your mouth, boy! Be happy that you’ve been fed!”

He shrugged, smiled, and took another of the meatballs. It was good that he could make Gupta uneasy and he felt better. At least he wasn’t being being ignored, treated like dirt. The food was good and he didn’t have to pay for it. Gupta grabbed the last piece of meat and spoke quietly.

“He’s different, Captain Sharma. We don’t think the same. But he asks for my advice. My work is important now ... And I know we must catch Mansoor. I can help do that. So can you. Now go. Find out what you can and report back. Don’t get picked up.” Gupta wiped his hands on his salwaar kameez and turned away. The talking was finished. The last words had been simple and they felt truthful.

When Gupta had gone he felt sorry for using those words. It had been wrong to try and hurt him. The man was no hero – looked clumsy and slow - yet he'd tried to help.

*

The day was ending and the glass in the office block grew darker as he sat watching. Wandering had given him a better knowledge of the streets. At home, his family would be picking up the pieces of life without Manish and he should be there with them. He pinched himself awake. Concentrate, see everything, something must happen before the night. Willing time to pass quickly, he knew it wouldn't. The city sounds drifted away and his head nodded towards sleep.

*

The first thing he knew was the pain in his ribs. Restless sleep was shattered and his eyes opened, blinking. People were around him, legs knocking him to one side as if he wasn't there. He bunched himself into a ball, his forehead on his knees. The night had not brought quiet here as it always did in his own alleyway. He pushed himself to stand, back against the wall, and rubbed his aching ribs. Turning into the crowd, he looked for a path home. Everyone was moving, pushing, getting places ... at least in his market they stopped to look.

Maybe Mansoor was far away and he was watching for nothing. The lit entrance of the tower seemed very near, he could dodge through the traffic to get there. The car brushed against his chest as horns sounded. Someone shouted just behind him but made no attempt to pull him back. He shook his head, ridding himself of the last of the sleep. Then, the road was suddenly clear and he ran towards the lit doors not stopping to think until he stood by them. Sharma had told him that Mansoor had killed many boys like Manish. The words passed through his brain, "Take care. Just tell me what you see, Surbjit. Anything will help. I'll do the rest..." But what could he see in just a few seconds as Mansoor passed through a door? He stood, feeling alone.

Then the car pulled up alongside him, swiftly and silently. The city lights, dancing on the smooth black surface, caught the corner of his eye and he turned to see the passenger door being opened by a driver moving quickly to do his job. Then Mansoor was there, yes it was him, speaking urgently into his phone before snapping it shut and sliding it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He spoke to the driver who reached on to the back seat and passed a fat travelling bag to Mansoor who began to walk across the pavement towards the entrance. The car slid away from the kerb. The scene was real and he was alive again. He'd watch for everything.

Mansoor was tall and wide. The middle button of his jacket strained across his stomach. The strong legs were spread as he walked so that, like a wrestler in the ring, it looked like he was already to attack. He could break bones and kill with his shoulders and arms. The dark eyes flicked around, expecting trouble. Sharma knew what Mansoor looked like. Seeing him close brought nothing new. There had to be more he could try, more he could learn. He stepped forward.

“Carry your bag, sah?”

Mansoor stopped and looked down at him and he wondered about speaking again. The blow or the hard word would come. But instead, the big man's face changed with a spreading smile.

“Name your price, goonda.” The voice was deep, a bit like Sharma's.

“Fifty rupees, sah.” Don't stop smiling. Think fast and watch.

Mansoor put back his head and laughed at the night sky before thrusting the heavy bag towards him.

“Here, take this. Carry it after me and earn yourself some money. I'm too tired to haggle with you.”

And he walked after Mansoor towards the glass doors. The bag was heavy and he wondered what was inside. The man could easily have carried the bag himself. Why was this happening? Mansoor pressed buttons on the wall, the doors slid quietly open and then they were inside a hall with lights all around the walls. Places to live as well as offices. The bearded security man, watched them, his red eyes unblinking.

“Good evening, Kemal.” Mansoor’s voice was calm, ordinary. The Sikh bowed his head, not smiling.

They were walking towards the lift’s shiny doors. Mansoor again pressed a button on the wall. Twenty-fifth floor. The wait began and his mind raced as he smiled.

“Easier than the stairs, eh?” Mansoor turned to speak to him, as though suddenly remembering that he was there. Don’t go quiet now.

“Yes, sah... I hope you’ve had a good day.”

The laugh came again. He felt Mansoor’s big hand rustling his hair and felt like moving away. But there was friendliness here.

“What’s your name?”

“Surbjit, sah.” He was pleased to hold the smile whilst looking straight into Mansoor’s face.

“What a charmer! You know how to do business. Don’t worry, you’ve earned your money.” He reached inside his jacket for his wallet before pulling out a dull, red fifty rupee note. “Here. Good job. Smart boy, getting the last bit of business out of the day. Just like me. I’ll use you again if you’re nearby. Now go. It’s late and I have work to do.”

The lift doors rumbled open behind Mansoor who smiled down at him again.

“Go! Kemal will open the doors for you. Difficult to get in, easy to get out.”

Turning towards the main entrance, he felt Mansoor’s eyes on his back. Kemal looked like he could read his mind. The exit button, somewhere beneath the desk top, was pressed to open the doors. The night’s hot air hit him as he walked through them and away.

When he looked back through the glass, Mansoor had disappeared. Kemal was still a bird of prey. The rolled up rupee note was still in his right hand which had formed into a fist, crushing it. This had come from

Mansoor's wallet. Throw it away? No. It had been earned just like the rest of his money. Pushing it into his pocket, he began to walk more quickly towards the old town, anxious to leave the bright lights behind.

*

Later, as he lay at home, mind full of Mansoor's soft voice, his closed eyes still saw a wide face which smiled sweetly but which could swiftly move towards hate. The hair swept back from the face, close to the head, so that it looked like the markings on a lizard's skin.

It was a nightmare face, one which made you want to move towards it.

Chapter 23. Gupta.

He'd been sitting on the bedroom chair for hours, thinking and thinking. Sagari stirred in the bed. For a second, he thought she'd call to him, but no. Her voice had been hard earlier and it was still in his head. Her message had been the old one; full of the same questions. What was he doing? Sharma was still making him perform like a street monkey. Climbing up unfinished buildings? Following boys around? What next? Cleaning out the cells? He should be giving the orders, not that Sharma. *Haraami!* He made his face look untroubled until Sagari had given up in disgust. But her words had hit him.

Surbjit's words had also pained him. Hate Sharma? Was it so clear? The truth was he was no longer sure what his feelings were. Yes, he'd hated Sharma, hated his youth, hated the fact that he could think quickly and that he never seemed to show any doubt or weakness when he gave orders. Sharma had attacked the job, slowed Magphur crime for a while. Even though the street gangs were still there, many people in the old town still felt that he was on their side and that he would help them. They trusted him. He moved so easily, smiling and exchanging words. Sagari turned in her sleep again. A child's cry came from the next room. Don't let anyone wake up now! All became silent and he started to think again.

Sharma didn't always follow the rules. That was his strength and his weakness. He never seemed to get criticised or caught! Well, he could soon change that. Yet, there was another thing which kept him awake. Something he couldn't work out. Sharma appeared to trust him as though they were a team. He remembered the words which had made him feel so good: "That was good work, Amarjit. I'll tell the commissioner what you've done." These words could have been there to make him obedient. The trust could be an act. If Surbjit could tell what he was thinking, then Sharma surely could. He'd have to be even more careful. Yet, Sharma did seem to depend on him more than anyone else, came to him more often than before. Something in the man had changed ...

The next thought puzzled him the most. He'd felt happier at work recently. Happier than at home and this wasn't right. The job had begun to excite him again: helping to catch the scum that had killed that Manish had been a turning point. You're a policeman, Gupta. Maybe a workhorse and not a leader, but always a

policeman. Too late to be anything else now. But he wanted that feeling again, the thrill in his veins when he'd come out of the tower after speaking to that witness. Good job done. Maybe Sagari should hear about his thoughts and feelings. He'd tell her straight away. No point in waiting. The phone rang as he started to get up.

Cursing his creaking knees, he walked stiffly towards the ringing in the next room. Three o'clock. The tiles were cool beneath his feet. This had better be worth it. His eyes were getting worse, the phone screen a blur. Then, it was Sharma's voice.

"Amarjit?"

"Yes?"

"Amarjit, I'm sorry to wake you. Can we talk?"

"Captain? I... What can I ...?"

"Please. It's Sanjay now. We're off duty."

The voice had lost some of its tension and was warm and relaxed. He drew the nearest wooden chair towards him, taking care not to scrape it on the hard floor, and sat down.

"Uh... Sanjay ... something wrong?"

"Just that I can't sleep. I need to speak to you about Ralph Thomas's murder. The case has gone on too long and I need answers. Oh, and how did the boy get on? Did you see?"

He tensed again. Was Sharma checking up on him? Making notes as he spoke? Searching for someone to blame? Using the boy to spy on Mansoor was a fool's game. There might be some evidence to show for it, but this wouldn't be found quickly. Careful, now, careful.

"Yes, he was fine... Sanjay. He'll watch the comings and goings. Bound to find something soon. I'll hand him a few rupees. Keep his mind on the job."

“Good idea.” There was a slight laugh. “He’ll never say no to money, no matter how badly he wants to bring down Mansoor. Look, Amarjit, there’s something else.”

He waited...

“I’ve been going over Doris Seebold’s words again and again. We must look into the past. We know that Ralph and Doris were together here, in Magphur, the night of the riots. Something happened on that night. Ralph disappeared for a time. I want to know what went on whilst they were apart. That’s the key to Ralph Thomas’s death. That, and Mansoor.”

He considered his words.

“Sanjay, many things must have happened on that night. It was a long time ago. How can we ... I find out about one incident. It’s impossible.”

“Amarjit, we’ll do this together. Can you get to the station two hours earlier tomorrow? I’ve been looking at this screen for hours, searching information on the riots. I can’t do it alone, I need your help.”

So that was it. A desk bound clerical job. Retirement would be next. He kept his voice calm.

“Couldn’t Pradha do that for you. He’s used to sitting still ... since his fall.”

“I’ve already got him working on this. He’s on his laptop at home, with his leg up. His wife hates me for making him do that.” There was the laugh again. “Amarjit, I need your experience. I need you to ask questions on the street. A lot of people here remember the riots. This is important, my friend.”

The man was becoming obsessed! With Mansoor, with this Thomas case. Still, what could be gained by saying no? His body sagged as he thought of the conversation he would have with Sagari. Even worse, he saw ahead to the silence he knew there would be between them. But, in the middle of this, there was the strange excitement.

“Very well, Sanjay. I’ll see you early tomorrow morning. And ... uh ... there are some people in my street who remember the riots. I can ask them some questions.”

“Excellent, Amarjit! Together we must build up a complete picture of that night. It’ll be hard but we may find the detail we need. Get some sleep now.”

The line went dead.

Eventually he moved back towards the bed, straightening and stretching his legs as he went. It had happened again. Sharma had got what he wanted. Still, he could not say that he was unhappy. Wide awake now, he looked at the clock. Two hours to rest, to collect his thoughts. He’d been told plenty of stories, the night of the riots with its fires and looting had often been in them, and he considered some of these. A political rally which had turned to violence and death. There were so many stories which would come out of investigating that night and it was so long ago. Difficult to know where to begin.

The riots had affected him in a way, even though he was not from this place. People – his parents, older family who never left their hill farms – had spoken of Magphur as the worst city in India after that night. They’d thought him mad to work here and perhaps they’d been right. The thought killed him, but he saw that the job of commanding the Magphur police station really had been too much for him. He’d been stupid to stay and should just take his family and return to the country. Here he was helping Sharma, a man he’d hated for a long time.

There was only one reason for the strange way he saw Sharma and it came to him in the grey hours as the city stirred. Working with Sanjay Sharma was the only way to get back his self respect, his pride. The job of looking for clues amongst the history of the Magphur Riots, like a detective, scared him and excited him but it was a job he could do.

As the darkness left the room, Sagari’s eyes were upon him. The questions would start soon. He reached for his uniform which had been folded neatly and carefully over the back of the chair.

Chapter 24. **Rhiannon.**

Raj wasn't there. Closing her eyes, she felt the loneliness spreading through her like pain. She'd been here before. Rajid's smooth words and love of the night before, the carefully chosen room service meal, the shared laughter in bed – it was always like that before he fucked off somewhere without saying anything.

It had been stupid to think that anything was ever going to be different. She thought angrily of the rules he'd given her again, whispered during the night after she'd given him what he wanted. Stay in the room whenever he went out, don't talk to anyone and wait for the time when he'd take her to the best places in the city – when he wasn't so busy. They hardly ever went out together anyway! Even back in London! All this bloody way and she had only seen the bits around the hotel. Don't speak to anyone! There was only the hotel staff and they just smiled and bowed to her for tips. Why the bloody hell should she stand for it? Then his threats came into her mind and she knew the answer.

The view from the window had kept her going. Always changing. Morning was the best time of day, cooler now and the streets less crowded. She could pick out people who'd become familiar to her. There was the tall bloke in the big feathered turban and red uniform who stood in the hotel courtyard. She could see the boy, wearing what looked like white pyjamas, sweeping the yard. He'd waved to her a couple of times. The waiter had told her how wise she was to avoid the heat, the pushing people. As if she had a choice!

Christ, his moods had got even worse. She used to be able to calm him. The other guests must have heard him shouting, kicking over that chair and table, telling her that she didn't understand, stamping through the door and down the corridor. He was right, she didn't get it. She couldn't get her head round his tears as she held him in her arms at night. Real fear. The change from the violence, the shouting, to the quivering tears could happen so quickly, without warning. It was easier to keep her mouth shut whenever he was around her. This life was hell. This wasn't her and she knew that now.

The old woman's death had made things worse. The police had been all over the corridor, examining her room, questioning the staff. He'd been around when everything had kicked off, texting. The heavy footsteps,

the loud voices in the corridor, had made him open the door to listen. He looked like he was crapping himself every time those bloody uniforms came near. She'd watched his mood change. His eyes had locked on her face, not seeing anything. That hurt. He was so far away from her now, caught up in his own world. Later, he'd gone to find one of the hotel staff. He'd probably given whoever it was money for information. When he returned his eyes were wild, he was sweating.

"That old girl, Doris, whatever ... she's dead."

Sitting beside him on the bed, she'd tried to relax him again, rubbing his back to get rid of the tension which choked them both whenever he was in that mood.

"God, Rajid, that's awful. Poor lady. What was it? An accident?"

"No-one knows. She checked out a few days ago. Left in a hurry. Some of her stuff had to be collected up and stuck in the office. Never came back."

Then she'd spoken her thoughts, probably too soon.

"This is the trip from hell! Two people dead, then there's the police. Let's go home, Rajid. Please. I don't like this place. I'm scared."

She heard her voice, whining, and she didn't like the memory. What came next made her clench her teeth and force back the tears – the way he'd stood over her and shouted in her face.

"Don't be so bloody stupid! I've told you. We're going nowhere till my job's done and I've got my money. All you've got to do is stay here and shut the hell up. We'll get away when I say."

He'd left her then, returning hours later, shaking and crying, to twist and turn for hours beside her on the bed. She'd calmed him as tenderly as she could before his steady breathing came as a relief. He'd woken up suddenly to hiss the instructions which made her a prisoner and she realised that he was a stranger and that she wouldn't live with him any more – not here, at home or anywhere else.

*

She stood looking down at the street below and watched the crowds grow and spread. Folding her arms, she flinched as she touched the bruises, the new ones caused by his nighttime grip. The cab stopping in front of the hotel to pick up guests told her what she had to do. Moving quickly, she pulled her suitcase from the wardrobe, the one he'd bought her to match his. She'd only need a few things. Wait. Money. The bedside cabinet. She opened the drawer and pulled out a money belt and sat on the bed to count notes and coins. She'd been allowed some money to buy herself "something nice" and she wondered how far this would take her. She'd no idea how much the stuff was worth. He'd taken charge of spending. Even if she only got to the other side of the city, at least she could lose herself.

The door rattled open, he was behind her and she winced as she felt his hot breath on the back of her neck. She fought down the fear. The suitcase lay by the open wardrobe door.

"Hello, babe! What's this?" His eyes flicked over the bed, the spread money. "Planning a shopping trip? This might help."

She felt his body close to hers as he sat beside her and in his hand was a thick roll of notes.

"I've been paid. We can go out tonight. Unless you'd rather stay in with me..."

Anger choked her words. Another five minutes and she'd have been out of this room. In a taxi. Just getting away. She could have met him in reception, leaving with a packed case! Standing up, moving away from the bed and from him, she breathed deeply. Maybe outside everything would be different. A place to talk, away from here, would be good.

"Rajid, for God's sake, let's get out of here. I need to see something, somebody. You never told me I'd be stuck here all day." To hell with what happened next. "I've had enough of living like this. What do you think I am? Part of your luggage to be dropped off and picked up when needed. I'm bloody well better than that!"

He got up and moved towards her, palms showing, trying to calm her.

“Babe, listen, I ...”

With a sudden, instinctive movement she swung her right arm to bat his hands away. Shock spread over his face as she stepped forward, challenging him. No more fear.

“No, Rajid! You won’t talk me round this time. All you give me is a load of useless words. Bullshit! I’ve no idea where you’ve been or what you’ve been doing. I never know what mood you’re going to be in. You keep telling me how dangerous this place is, how I wouldn’t like it out there. Why the hell did you make me come here then?”

There was no flare up, no attempt to strike her this time. He was in control. For once, he was looking straight in her face, as though noticing her for the first time in ages. This was better.

“Look, Rhi, this wasn’t what I wanted for you. This was going to be a holiday, a honeymoon. It’s just that ... well ... things got complicated, didn’t they. More work than I was expecting and ... I wanted to keep you safe. Look, let’s make up, yeah? I’ll take you to a restaurant I know. One of the best. We’ll have a proper talk. How’s that, eh?”

“Where were you, Rajid?” She blurted out the thought and saw his face freeze.

“What? ... When?”

“That night when we met up with your mates, those blokes you tell me you work with. Where did you go to all that time? You weren’t worried about leaving me out on my own then were you? C’mon, you want to talk, start talking now. Be straight with me, Rajid.”

“Like I said, there was more to do than I thought. A job cropped up, that’s all. Some goods wanted shifting and they needed some muscle.” She saw his old confidence returning. “The good thing is I’ve got

some more money coming from that. Just one phone call and I can pick my pay tonight. C'mon, let's get out of here. We'll have a bit of a tour first and I'll book a table for later. Put that dress on. The one I like."

"Rajid, you're doing it again ..."

"Rhi, I know I've been an idiot, but I've had worries. We'll sort this out tonight, promise. A change of scene will get this sorted. If you want, we'll start thinking about going home early. OK?"

There were no more words. She went to the open wardrobe to search for the lime green dress which he'd bought her for the journey. At least she was getting out of here. More time to think. She kicked the suitcase out of her way, back into the wardrobe. He watched her, saying nothing, smiling.

*

The afternoon sun beat down and she was glad of the broad-brimmed sun hat Raj had passed her as they were leaving the room. After the taxi, just for a laugh he'd said, they'd taken the cycle rickshaw for a ride through the old town. This was fun, a bit more like it. She'd been closed in so long that her senses spun through the scents, sounds and sights. In places the traffic crawled and the driver twisted and turned the handlebars any way he could, pointing and waving as he shouted out of his window. Raj made a joke about the man's sweaty vest – head back, laughing madly – but she couldn't hear him. The noise of horns filled the shivering air and dust lifted and floated in the sunlight. She tried to drink in the scene - the stalls, the cool temples, the women's clothes – anxious to leave the hotel room behind. She knew that, when this was over, her mind would give her nothing real, only splashes of colour and snapshots of movement. There was too much.

The new town was nicer, more in order. At least parts were. Some of it was just a massive building site with glass blocks above hard mud. But there was wealth, she could see that, and some pretty smart places to live. The place had a future, she thought, and she was pleased to feel her mood improving. This place was growing the style which Raj wanted. He was right, they did need to talk.

*

The restaurant was well chosen. The Mountain View. Every step had been taken to attract new customers. Old style India – the sort of carvings and carpets she’d seen in holiday brochures – mixed with modern furniture in the eating area. The waiters were dressed in proper black suits with bow ties and wouldn’t have looked out of place in a smart London eaterie. They moved between the curved, decorated pillars. Two of them nodded to Rajid in a familiar, friendly way and she wondered how many times he’d been here.

They were in the most private part of the room, with only half a dozen or so tables visible from where they were. A place for a secret meeting. A place he knew well. Too many questions buzzed in her already cluttered brain. She tried to focus on the menu and was surprised to find that she was hungry. There were many more dishes than on the room service card. She just stopped herself from flinching as his hand reached across the table to hold hers. It was like one of their early dates back home, but that had been different.

“What you having, babe?”

“It’s all new to me, Raj,” she forced herself to sound normal, to keep the aggression out of her voice. “I’ve hardly been outside. Remember?”

“Okay, okay,” he said good humouredly, shaking his head and smiling. Nothing was going to spoil his mood. She saw him glance left and right, as though checking for watchers or listeners. Yes, he knew this place. “Tell you what, let me do the ordering.” He released her hand and looked again at the menu.

His conversation with the waiter was rapid. He’d prepared himself. Just like old times when he’d taken her for Indian food. She must’ve been so easy to impress. The meal came quickly. The chana masala was good. The garlic and chillies made her fan her mouth with her hand, making him laugh. His soothing voice was distant and she made herself nod and smile. She was going to leave him. In a way she already had. Back in London she’d tell him. No need to worry about it now. Her brother would put her up for a while. Her father would gloat when he heard. Let him. It was time to start thinking of her own safety and she couldn’t

go on being left alone here. To hell with the loyalty which Raj didn't even recognise. He was needed for a while longer to take her home, hopefully soon. Speak to him nicely now, small talk, anything.

His phone rang and she saw him hold up his finger to stop her talking. He always did that. Forget his attempts to make up. The man was a bastard. As she watched him, her hate hardened. She loathed the way he listened closely to phone business, cutting her out completely. His smug smile spread as the conversation ended and he placed the mobile on the table before reaching across and taking her hands once more.

"Good news, Rhi. They're going to pay me the last of my money. Someone's brought it to me. Outside. Cash. We can start thinking of going home, girl. In a few days, maybe. When we've enjoyed ourselves."

"But who? How did they...? She slid her hands away into her lap.

His answer was a tap on the side of his nose. Pathetic! More things she mustn't know. She watched him walk out. Poor man. There he was, about to be paid off like an errand boy, with a bag or an envelope of cash, thinking he was the coolest operator in India. Her thoughts whirled. Once, she'd loved the way he moved and talked. Never lost for words in any crowded bar or when they were alone. He was like an animal to be tamed – exciting after the boredom of her parents' home. It was the secrecy which killed her. The "buying and selling," the jobs "for me mates" had taken him away from her for hours, for days, on end and, when he came back, there could be no questions. Silence and moodiness would gradually leave him and he would start talking, sometimes without listening or even looking at her. Her affection would relax him slowly, but she could still see and smell the fear on him. The honest truth was that things had been turning bad for a long time – in London and Magphur.

For the first time, she noticed the other diners – people talking, laughing, enjoying the food, living – and she began to dread the night back at the hotel, the night she must spend with him. Still, her words had stung him once today and she had more such words to throw at him. She could be in control. A loud burst of laughter, from a lady at the next table, made her look around. She wanted to laugh again and have fun. She'd get him to stay out as late as possible tonight, spend some of his new money on her, not take her back to that

godawful hotel room. There had to be somewhere else to stay in Magphur. This place could have a room, or they could find somewhere else. When he came back, she'd turn on the old charm. With cash in his hand, he was always in the mood to be flash.

The three gunshots cut through the restaurant noise. Later, she'd be amazed at how much of the scene she could remember. Some diners froze or stood up to face the main entrance. Incredibly, others carried on eating, talking, their brains unable to make sense of the new sounds. Then came the panic, the running, tables and food overturned. Getting up, she found herself pushing against the escaping crowd. Raj, she knew this was about him. She had to get there, to see what he'd done. Then she was in the night heat. People were running in all directions, a space was cleared on the pavement. The traffic continued to move, horns sounding. Life passing.

In the space, the body was lying on its back, three neat red holes in the middle of the chest. A pool of blood circled beneath the twisted shoulders. The arms were spread outwards from this rosette. Money, notes, moved gently around the body, blown by the passing traffic and brushing the pavement like street dancers. She felt herself beginning to vomit before strong hands gripped her shoulders and tried to force her back the way she had come. She looked into the stranger's face. The man's eyes were wild, pleading. Then, with a twist of her arms, he was gone and she stepped past the watchers. Raj, she had to see Raj, her husband.

Swaying, giddy, she looked down at the face. Raj was still smiling hopefully. The right fist was slowly releasing its grip on more rupees, allowing them to join the dance.

"Raj? ... Raj!"

But he'd left her again. Through her tears, she saw an old man shuffle forward from the crowd and stoop to gather a handful of money. Other people started to do the same. No-one stopped them.

Then the darkness swept over her and she was falling.

Chapter 25. Surbjit.

He was pleased. Mansoor had liked him, would use him again. Good beginning. He imagined himself travelling in the lift next time, entering the apartment. That would be dangerous – looking around, noticing things. For now, there was the waiting. Then there was the thought of the worried look on his parents' faces, their questions. They wanted him to be with them, they needed the money. His father had worked on the stall for a few hours and his leg had been painful, keeping the family awake. Well, he would try twice as hard at his jobs when this was done and this would make him feel less guilty. Father would be proud again.

People were noticing him now for no-one else was squatting like him and so he had to move. Standing up, he bent his knees to get the blood flowing and began to think about food. It would be good to have the fat sergeant, and his money, here. He felt in his pocket and smiled at the thought of a roti. His mouth began to water as he walked along the street towards the tables where he had stood with Gupta. Even amongst all this he felt alone. Then traffic blocked his way and he stood waiting for a way through to the food. Things moved faster here, he wouldn't have to wait long.

The car stopped in front of him and Mansoor was looking at him through the open rear window. No time to prepare a smile. Mansoor's face looked kind.

“Ah, it's my friend Surbjit. Are you working?”

Thinking quickly, he smiled.

“Uh ... no. I was just going to eat.”

“Well, then, you should earn your food. Jump in. You can carry my bags. I've got more stuff this time.”

Mansoor opened the door and slid across the back seat to make room for him. The smell of polished leather, mingling with the scent of aftershave, was strong as he settled into the car. They began to move. Street sounds were muffled, the engine was quiet and he felt almost at peace away from the closeness of the crowd. The car's air was cool.

“So, Surbjit, business good? Making plenty, eh?”

He looked into Mansoor’s face, holding the gaze.

“Not really, sah. I need more work. Anything.”

Careful. He mustn’t mention his family. This wasn’t the place to speak of his home, his business. Still, Mansoor’s look invited him to speak, drew him in. The driver spoke as the car slowed to a halt.

“Sir, shall I carry your bags.”

“Don’t worry, Ashok, we’ve got this covered. Go, pick up our dinner guest.”

He saw the driver’s eyes turn towards him in the rear view mirror. There was nothing pleasant in the look. The man looked more of a killer than Mansoor.

Sliding from the car to stand in the morning warmth, he watched as Ashok placed three large bags at his feet: two business cases and a travelling bag. Expensive. The car slid away from them into the first rush of the day and he was alone with Mansoor. He felt his hair being ruffled again, just like his father had done earlier. Good, good. Mansoor still seemed to like him. That helped. Then they were making their way through the sliding doors. The bag was heavy, needing two hands. Mansoor walked ahead with the two briefcases. The guard was there, in the corner of his eye, watching as they moved towards the lift. What now? The answer came.

“Surbjit, bring that bag upstairs. You’ll like my view.”

The fear stirred in his belly as the lift doors closed behind them. This was further than Sharma had told him to go. He placed the bag on the floor between his feet and forced his knees to stop shaking. He focused on his reflection and felt Mansoor’s arm brush against his. Aftershave couldn’t quite hide the sweat smell. The gentle hum of the lift seemed to go on for ever until everything stopped with a slight jolt. Then, a few seconds of silence until the doors whispered open to show a carpeted room.

“Home. Bring the bag, Surbjit.”

Stooping to pick up the two bags, he swallowed hard and followed Mansoor. A private lift! This place must be worth millions! He tried to look at everything as the doors closed behind him. The floor was soft beneath his sandaled feet. The wall-wide window looked out over Magphur with the sun touched buildings rising from the dust like the pictures in shop magazines. The furniture looked square and far apart. You had to take many steps before sitting down. He thought of his own home where you had to move furniture to make the space to walk. Mansoor’s words, in between bursts of laughter, crashed across the room.

“I see that you like my home, Surbjit. Put the bags down there. Something to drink?”

He placed the bags carefully on the carpet, next to his dusty feet. It was so cool up here. So quiet. Where was the traffic noise? Mansoor was a dark shape against the window sunshine. The chairs, the table, the winding stairs, the cloth on the walls – all was red and black. Difficult to take in.

“Surbjit?”

“Oh, some water ...”

“Water?” Mansoor snorted. “I’ve got juice – orange, lemon, grapefruit. I have everything you need.”

“Water, please.” Keep the voice calm, stop shaking.

“Manisha!”

Someone else in the apartment? A door opened and a woman moved silently into the bright beams behind Mansoor. Pale green sari, gold at the edges, so different from the dark colours all around her. The bow showed respect. No smile on the tired face, the dark, dead eyes were fixed on her boss with what looked like quiet fear. He’d seen that look before. Beautiful and watchful. Difficult to tell her age.

“Bring our guest a glass of water, please, Manisha. He’s been working for me. And now, Surbjit. You must sit for a while. Then I’ll pay you. That’s what you want, eh?”

He moved towards the nearest chair as Mansoor laughed like a friend. Then ...

“No, not that one. Here.”

He turned to see Mansoor pointing towards the wooden chair which stood in the sunlight. It's back was straight, high. It was a chair to be questioned in, like the one at the police station. At least this one had a plain red cushion which was soft. He sat squinting at Mansoor. Movement behind him, a rustle of silk, and the woman gave him his water. He picked it up from the silver tray and watched his shaking hand before raising the glass to take a clumsy gulp. Relax. Mansoor nodded and he heard the sari moving again before the door closed behind him.

“Forgive me, Surbjit. But you aren't dressed like my usual guests and I'm very particular about my expensive furnishings. My cleaner is well paid. I've worked hard to get this place.” Mansoor's arm swept before him, showing the room as he sank back onto the sofa, dropping away from the sunbeams. Better. Much easier to see him now. Mansoor held a drink, a golden liquid.

“You know, Surbjit, you are very fortunate to be here and to be one of the privileged few who've seen my home ... one of my homes.”

“It's a nice place, sah. Very comfortable.” His smile was working more easily, he was glad to see Mansoor smile back pleasantly. Relax a bit, look for something, anything to tell Sharma. The sunlight was strong and he lifted his hand to shade his face for no more than a few seconds, eyes turning side to side.

“And you've helped me, Surbjit. You've made me feel better. Are you confused ... Frightened?”

“Sah, you asked me to carry your bags and I'm here.” Stupidity was best in this moment.

“I'll explain.” The raised hand called for silence. “Sometimes I bring someone like you, someone from the streets, to this place. You see, it reminds me of how far I've come.” He looked around the room once more, drinking in the success, a happy playground bully. “All this should also tell you what you can achieve ... in time and with help.” He stopped, looking serious.

Where was this leading? Too fast. Too much danger around him and all he knew about were the colours of the apartment. A wealthy place. Sharma couldn't do anything with that. He felt Mansoor's stare again and the voice continued.

"You're a clever boy, Surbjit. I see that. I was like you, always looking for money to live. It's hard. And when you have all this you don't want to let it go."

He finished his water, gaining time to think. This could be a threat, a job offer, or both. He should talk like a street boy now.

"Sah, thank you for the water. I'll be very happy to carry your bags for you, or open your car door whenever ..."

Mansoor was suddenly close, looking down at him, his face hidden by sunlight again. There was the powerful smell of the drink. He spoke slowly and clearly.

"Surbjit, you have been watching this building. I know that. My people have told me. If you want to do a job for me, make money, that's fine. If there's another reason you are hanging around, someone else you are working for then there will be nowhere for you to hide. I like you, boy, but I must have the truth. Be my friend, eh?"

His mind went back to the meeting with Gupta. If someone had seen. He needed to be calm ... innocent.

"I need money...for my family. There are many rich people in this part of the city. When I leave here, I'll find other bags to carry. Maybe I'll clean some cars. Wipe away the dust and the flies. If you like, I can wash your car."

Mansoor's laughter exploded again above his head and he felt the slap on his left shoulder. Friendly, but hard. Then his right hand was being lifted and a ball of rupees was pushed into his palm. He stood up and, awkwardly, offered his empty glass to Mansoor. More laughter as he was led, a gentle hand on his stinging shoulder, towards the lift doors.

“Stay close, Surbjit. I’ll be watching for you. There’ll always be work ... and easy money.”

A phone rang somewhere. Bhangra. Then Mansoor was turning away to take the call. Listen now, pick up information. Don’t let the lift come before the call ends! Mansoor’s voice was quick. Worried? Anxious?

“You’ve brought her. Good. Any problem with the pick up? No? We’ll use a different place next time... Downstairs. Right. I’m coming down now.”

Mansoor span around and looked past him towards the lift. The bell, as the doors opened, broke the silence and they moved out of the apartment to stand side by side again, going down. Words raced through his brain but he could say nothing.

They were standing in the reception area, business suited men crossing the polished floor. He saw her standing beside the driver. Stopping to unwrap the rupees in his sweating palm, a few steps away, he watched and listened. The woman looked into Mansoor’s face. Her beauty was different from the lady upstairs. Strong and lively. Without fear. The eyes were shining and her words were quick and showed force. No chance of hearing in this place. The red sari stood out in the polished surroundings of the hallway, the reflection spilling over the shiny floor like blood. He saw all this in seconds, before the lift doors closed behind Mansoor and the woman. He turned towards the sliding exit to see that the driver had been watching him, had not taken his eyes off him since he’d come out of the lift.

He walked quickly. That had scared him. For safety, he’d keep away from the new city for a while no matter what Sharma said. The doors freed him and he passed through on shaking legs. Even in the street’s heat, he was still shivering on the way home.

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He felt glad to be back with his work in the market place again. People he knew looked him in the eye and he returned greetings with a smile. He’d escaped from fear and didn’t want to worry about street gangs any

more. Father was there, working the stall, sitting on the wooden stool, waiting for customers, making sure that the space, the business, wouldn't be lost. He'd been away too long and felt the shame of this again.

At first his father did not see him standing beside the stool. He spoke quietly.

"Father?"

The tired face rose to look at him. "Ah, Surbjit. You've come to work?"

"Yes, Father. Sit there and leave the rest to me."

It was good to be selling again. To be calling, getting the best price, feeling the money in his hands and seeing his father smiling. Once, he thought of the crumpled notes in his pocket, the ones handed to him by Mansoor. He'd add that to the family pot later.

When work was finished, he saw his father leaning heavily on the cart for support and helped him to push it towards home. Not a bad day. Manish was in his thoughts and he wondered if it was the same for his father.

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Everyone had gone to bed early and there were snores in the house, but he couldn't sleep. Mansoor scared the hell out of him. But there was something else. He'd been with someone who could do exactly what they wanted at any time. That was real power, true freedom. There was more money to be had just by hanging around the tall office block. He could go after this, keep carrying bags and cleaning cars for a while. And how much did Mansoor really know about Manish anyway? There was only Sharma's word that Mansoor could be involved in his brother's death. The real killers were already behind bars. That was enough. His living family could be helped by making money in the new city. Mansoor liked him, would reward him generously. That was all he needed to know. He could hide his fear. Yes, there could be other jobs ...

He moved silently from his mattress and made for the open door. Once outside, it felt great to be running free in the cool of the early night. Not many people around but maybe Sharma would still be at the station. If he wasn't, he'd be where he lived. It would be good to know a few more facts about Captain Sharma. He ran faster, his mind clearing. Sharma could make use of any of the things he had seen today. After that there'd be no more information, no more standing around watching and getting bored. There was only himself and his family. He ran faster.

The station was well lit and busy. The area in front of the desk was again full of people. Sharma. Where was Sharma? He had to get this done. Break free. Get on with his life and owe nothing. An old, crouching man came near him, hand outstretched, making him move impatiently away. This place was a shit heap, with smells worse than on the street. No need to come here again after tonight.

Captain Sharma. There, suddenly. Standing head and shoulders above everyone. He pushed his way through the grumbling, cursing people. This would be quickly said, here and not in some office. Then he would run back through the streets towards his home. Say what you have to say. Don't worry about being rude. Sharma saw him, spoke first.

"Surbjit! Good. We'll talk. But not here. Too much noise. Come outside."

The sweat showed through the back of Sharma's shirt as they walked through the crowded room. Hands grasped at them, he shrugged his way clear. The air of the street was better, just. The words would come. Sharma stopped and turned as they moved towards the dark corner.

"Glad to be out of there. Now, Surbjit. Tell me what you've seen. Everything, no matter how small."

"Sanjay."

The call had come from behind him. A woman's voice. Sharma looked over his head and smiled.

"Sanjay. You said you'd meet me. I've been waiting." Words at the beginning of anger.

Turning impatiently, he saw her. The red sari. His gaze froze on the dark eyes. The same face he'd seen in the hallway, with Mansoor, as she walked across the polished floor towards the opening lift doors. Sharma's voice sounded soft, and this surprised him. He looked at their faces. These people knew each other well.

"Seema, you shouldn't have come. It's madness here. Another killing. Go home to the children. Tell me everything there."

Sharma's wife. Seema.

He couldn't read her face as she looked hard at her husband before turning away.

Chapter 26. Sanjay.

Escaping the crush of the reception area, he walked down the empty corridor past the cells and interview rooms. Shouts, screams came from behind the door on his right. Such sounds never mattered. Nothing could touch him tonight, for his mind was full. Seema had looked hurt, angry. Angrier than he'd ever seen her. She'd left a neighbour looking after the children and this had only happened once before. Just one more hour in this damned place and then get home quickly. Hand over to Gupta. He'd read through Amarjit's report of the brief interview with Rhiannon Patel, just after they brought her in. She was ready to talk. The first, shocked accounts were always the most accurate and helpful, the words less guarded. This was the time when people found it more difficult to hide behind lies. He'd dig deeper.

Surbjit had looked far away in another world. Still needed time to get over his brother's death. The information could be useful: the layout of the apartment, that was unexpected. The fact that Mansoor would use Surbjit again was no surprise. The boy was brilliant at getting trust, that smile was a weapon. Yet, tonight, there'd been no smile. Surbjit had mumbled through the facts of his meeting with Mansoor and then run off, suddenly. Never mind, it was a start. No reason to think that he wouldn't find out more about Mansoor. Details would help bring that bastard down.

His first sight of Rhiannon Patel was as expected. She was slumped forward behind the table, her face hidden behind the curtains of red hair. Those curls! He sat opposite her, jerking his head to dismiss the constable from his position by the back wall. The glass of water was untouched. He breathed deeply, thinking about the right shade of voice. Start with sympathy.

"Mrs Patel, how are you feeling now?"

No answer.

"I know how hard this is, believe me. But I must ask you some more questions. Whilst things are ... fresh in your mind."

This was going to be long. Seema would be home now, also sitting and waiting. One more try.

“I want to catch your husband’s killers. I’ll need your help ...”

Her head lifted, the hair moved to show her face. No tears, just stony, white anger staring at him. He waited.

“My husband wasn’t a good man, but I could have saved him. We were okay at home ... before we came here.”

The words were cold, hard, without feeling and not to be interrupted.

“Rajid had his deals. Buying this, selling that, moving stuff on, stolen goods, whatever. Wanted to be a big time crook because he thought it was cool. Drove his family nuts. Funny, when we met in the pub I thought he was dead glamorous. Talked to me like no-one had ever done before. Made me feel like somebody. Not like at home ...”

She looked at the table again, voice dying away. He needed a question now, some definite information to take away.

“Mrs. Patel, your husband told me he had business in Magphur. What business?”

Her expression was slightly puzzled, as though she was struggling to make sense of his words. The voice remained dead.

“Rajid had some dodgy mates. Some he met one night, back in London. Worse than him. Said they’d give him the chance to travel back to his family’s home.” Her laugh was short, bitter. “It was more of the same, though he never said as much. Just travelling a hell of a lot further to pick up stuff that had been thieved. Bloody fool treated the whole thing like some sort of promotion. Walked round as if he was some big gangster. Never saw him much after that. Always flitting over to this bloody place. Then, out of the blue, he said I could travel with him too. Chance of a honeymoon.” That laugh again.

“What was your husband like when he returned home from his journeys to India? Scared? Violent? Did he mention any names?” Careful, not too many questions too quickly, give her time to think. Sometimes, silence made them speak.

He saw her eyes close. Memories pained her.

“He never said any names. But he was ... different. Not so funny. Like he’d done stuff ... He was ... angry all the time.”

“Drugs?”

She frowned. Past events in her mind?... Seeing the past differently? He’d seen people in this room, that chair, go through this before. It was as though the bareness of the surroundings – the grey, scarred walls – made them think there was no more to be lost. You had to think clearly here, or just give up and cry. And she was trying to keep her mind together.

“Maybe he did drugs... No, I don’t think so ... I don’t know. But he was different. Angrier. Scared at the same time. Moods kept changing... Shivering, screaming. Sometimes I could handle him...other times I had no chance. A few times he just lashed out.”

He tensed, his thoughts scattering. There were nights when Seema had to hold him, whisper soothing words, quieten him with her strength. He wondered what she was doing whilst he was sitting here. Enough! End this interview. Give her more time to think. One more question. Breathing deeply, trying to forget Seema, he began.

“And on this last trip, you were with your husband. Tell me something about his movements. What did he do?”

Her eyes were fixed on him, as though reading his thoughts and feelings like Seema could. Behind this woman’s pain, there was strength. She’d survive.

“It was same old, same old.” She paused, seeming to sense his confusion at these words. “Just the same as at home. I was stuck in the room whilst he went off doing God knows what. Kept promising to take me out. Only did that once ... no, twice ... and that got him killed.”

Something snapped in his mind and the next question came easily.

“When was the first time?”

“What?”

“Was it the night at The Palitana? Very soon after you arrived in Magphur? The time your husband told me about? Leaning forward, he spoke the next statement slowly and clearly. “The night Ralph Thomas was killed.” Careful, don’t give her words, let her speak for herself.

“If that’s what Rajid told you, then that’s when it was.”

“Were you with your husband the whole time, Mrs Patel?”

“Course I was. Anyway, what’s all this stuff from the past got to do with Rajid’s murder. Her voice began to rise. The anger was taking hold now. “Which case you trying to solve?”

Good question. He wished that something other than instinct could guide him now. Keep talking. Meet her anger with calm.

“Did he leave you at any point? Mrs Patel, your husband was killed in cold blood in a public place. Such things are wrong! You have said a great deal, that’s good, but I need to know this now. It might guide me towards those responsible for your husband’s killing. Did Rajid leave The Palitana on the night when Ralph Thomas was killed?”

Silence. Her face remained blank, but her hands, fists, showed the struggle inside. Wait, wait ...

“I told you, at the hotel, he was with me all the time.”

“It’s clear from your statement that your husband knew his killer, was going to meet him. He may have known him from previous, er, business dealings. Whether or not your husband did wrong, he did not deserve to be shot in the street. You shouldn’t have seen that. Help me, Mrs Patel.”

Her voice was low, as though speaking to herself, digging out the parts of the story which were hard to face. This was her confession, although he knew that she was no criminal.

“Like I said to the other one, the sergeant. He went after his pay. He might have known who he was meeting. The man on the bike... he had a helmet hiding his face. Engine was running. Money was everywhere. He came to kill Rajid.” The horror was washing through her now, he could see. “Why? Why bring all that money for him if he was going to ... He must’ve grabbed at it ...”

She looked even more exhausted now. He looked at his watch. Seema would be getting ready for bed. One last push for the truth.

“You must not let this man, these men, escape. Rajid may have tried to cheat on a deal in some way, for that they killed him. Or, he may have been shot because he knew things, too much. Do you think they will let you escape, walk the streets, if they believe that you share that knowledge? They take no risks, I can only protect you so far.”

He started to rise, pushing back the wooden chair. She could stay in the room next to his office tonight, with a policeman standing guard outside. It was more comfortable there. Then in the morning ...

“Yes, he left me that night. The night the old man was killed. Two hours I sat in that place ... speaking to no-one. Told me not to say anything. Ever since, I’ve been beating myself up. All I could think about at the end was leaving him. I didn’t know him! We were together, married, but I didn’t know who the hell he was ...!”

The tears came then, flowing through the splayed fingers which covered her face. Her body jerked with deep sobs and she began to rock on her chair. Moving swiftly to get help, his job was done.

The questions stabbed his brain as he walked away from the interview room, back towards the reception area, emptying now. Why hadn't he interrogated the Patels more firmly at the beginning, just after Ralph Thomas's death? He'd left Gupta to do too much. Manish's death had distracted him. No, that wasn't fair. Mansoor had taken up all his thoughts. Was he a policeman, able to think his way forward, or was he still a street boy simply following his instincts wherever they took him? Seema, he must see Seema.

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He found her sitting by the table, dressed in her daytime sari. The girls must have gone to bed. Keep the voice light.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now. I crept in. Didn't want to wake you."

Her lips moved into a tight smile, but the eyes did not move as she looked at him. She'd been crying.

"You look exhausted, Sanjay. We left some food for you. Eat now, we'll talk later."

She brought the tiffin boxes and one plate to the table and sat opposite him as he ate. It was like many times before, but this wasn't the same. It was worse than the silence of the interview room. Pushing his plate away, he reached across to take her hand. There had to be peace in this moment. Before ... Before what? Then she spoke.

"Sanjay, we're going to have a child. I should have told you before but you were too ... busy."

Her words sunk into his tired mind, he felt his face stretch into a grin as he held her hand more tightly. It must have been his lateness which stopped her smiling. He moved round the table towards her, too happy to ask more questions.

Chapter 27. Gupta.

He ran his hand over his tired face and leaned back. Enough. Shut down the laptop and go home. Glancing at his watch, he thought about the possibilities for the rest of the evening. He could stay here and look at web sites about Magphur's past ... His brain ached with stories of the riots. All that was over thirty years ago, when he had been a boy in Rishka. Or he could go home and face Sagari ... Those troubled silences. He was hungry now and he couldn't stay here all night. His notepad was full. Just one more read through of the notes. Good to feel like a policeman again. The jotted memories of the old people's stories, the eye-witnesses, were forming a story. The work had been hard, walking the streets, talking to the old ones. Still, better than being stuck in front of this bloody laptop. Sharma had been right about that.

But some of the news items had caught his eye as he clicked idly before beginning to log off. Glimpses of a world away from India: terror attacks in Paris, London. Long beaches and sea which he'd never seen. Violence mixed with views of holiday beaches. When first married, Sagari had teased him about his "closed mind" - a lack of ambition. His steadiness used to amuse her ... then things changed with the passing years. Their only journeys were to his family in Himachal Pradesh. He'd never left India nor knew anybody who had. But it could be possible to travel one day ... The screen went blank as his computer shut down. He gathered his thoughts, imagined himself telling the story.

12th August, 1983. The riots had come suddenly, like a tidal wave. A peaceful start to the day. Council Elections approaching. Moshin Khan's supporters, hundreds of them carrying pictures and banners, cheering and laughing through Magphur. When the heat grew, the policemen had still chatted good humouredly to the marchers. All had been well. Rival supporters had kept their distance, happy to chant and sing rather than shout and throw insults. One old policeman had been clear about that. Then, the first gunshots. Background sounds at first. Firing into the air. High spirits. No-one arrested. A mistake? Indecision?

Then a woman's screams had cleared a space in the crowd. The grandfather, sitting in the corner of his house, had described the blood which stained her clothes. He'd been good that old man, many others stayed quiet or refused to speak. A detailed memory amongst the scrawled notes. People rushed to help her before

realising that the blood was not hers but her husband's; dead, a few feet away. Killed by a stray bullet, it was said. Anger, blame, fighting, chaos. Police lathis didn't work, the violence spread. Stories came out of the flames and the darkness. It had been hard to record all these, but witnesses' words had stayed with him: the man who had hidden beneath the straw cart until it had burst into flames, the family who had run to the temple only to find that it was full of rioters ... The young girl who had watched looters carrying things, anything of value, from the temple. Her eyes had lit up as she spoke and he had imagined her like she was ... young, frightened. Afterwards, news reports of "heavy handed policing." There were heroes on that night, bad guys too.

The sudden voice scattered his thoughts.

"You're working very late, Sergeant Gupta."

He turned to see Gopal. Bastard had made him jump. How long had he been there?

"Sharma ... uh ... Captain Sharma asked me to follow a line of enquiry, sir. I was just..."

"The Thomas murder?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've been reading through your notes. Good. Nice to see a hand written report. Everything on the laptop these days, eh! Nothing like that when I was a young policeman. We were on the streets a lot more. But you know this, an experienced officer like yourself." His eyes flicked around the office, seeing everything. "You still use a notepad. I'd be the same. Show me your notes."

"Sir, this is just ..."

"Don't worry, sergeant. This isn't an inspection. Just drove over to see Captain Sharma on my way home but he's not in his office. Clearly busy elsewhere at the moment. Progress with the Thomas case?"

The voice was hard, accusing. The old fox was loving the idea of dropping in unexpectedly, catching the station, him, unprepared. His brain raced, throat dry as he watched Gopal reading. This was uncomfortable. It was more than just being looked at by a superior. There was something in his mind which would not become clear ... It was like he had found a long lost item, put it down and then couldn't find it again. Something seen, something read. Where? His mind raced as the grey eyes moved across the notes. Gopal fixed him with that strange gaze once again. Neither of them spoke for a while.

“Mm, you’ve done well, Sergeant. Here, take your work, it will be of great use to Captain Sharma, I’m sure. Now go home and get some rest.”

The notebook was back in his hand and he felt relieved. Then he remembered something, a half memory, an image on the screen, and he knew that he had to keep talking, say anything, make sure that Gopal stayed.

“Sir, would you like to ask me questions about my work? I’ve been thinking a great deal about the Ralph Thomas case.”

Gopal turned, the smile was faint. He looked in control, untouchable.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Sergeant. I have a clear idea of where you’re going. I want to question Captain Sharma though. I’ll send for him tomorrow. Go home now.” He had reached the door.

“Sir, the Magphur Riots. You were there ... So was Ralph Thomas.”

“Many thousands of people were there that night, sergeant. Terrible time.”

“Sir, you were a hero of the riots. It’s well known. You saved lives. The records show that you and your men fought off the looters. What was that night really like? It’ll help the enquiry ... sir.” He chose his words carefully.

Gopal walked a few paces back towards the desk.

“Sergeant, you have your laptop, your notes, your eye-witnesses. Everything, including the part I played, is on record.”

The tone showed irritation. Contempt too. But he’d finish what he wanted to say, even it could end his career.

“It would be good to speak to a policeman who was there that night, there aren’t many left. The riots were at their worst by the Sikh Temple. The looters were ...”

“Sergeant, are you really enjoying this?”

“Sir?”

“Being in this station, working hard, alone. You were in charge once, weren’t you. Until I moved you down.”

“Yes, sir.”

Where was this going? Gopal’s expression said nothing.

“Ralph Thomas’s murder should have been solved a long time ago. Finished with and put on file. Murder by a couple of gangland thugs, probably. Captain Sharma has a competent record. I expected quicker results. What’s happening?”

“Sir, we have been looking into ...”

“This case must be closed, sergeant.” The voice sliced through any reply. Then the words softened. “Now, I’ve seen you at work and I’m impressed. Maybe there has been a ... misjudgement. Come to my office tomorrow morning, forget any other orders that you have. Nine o’clock sharp. There are ways of rewarding good men like you. Now, go home. Goodnight, Sergeant Gupta.”

He watched Gopal close the door as he left. Sagari would be sitting down to eat with the boys. In the evenings she always changed into the dark blue salwar suit. Like wealthy women. Easy to imagine what she was saying about him. The boys' respect was slipping away, painfully.

It had come, the opportunity to get Sharma, to show that he was the one doing the real work whilst the Captain was somewhere else. Gopal had been there, a few feet away from him. Only a few words would have done it. "I'll work hard to find the killers" or "I think I see a way to finish this enquiry." So many words to choose from. The meetings with the informer ... details which could bring Sharma down. His returning ambition. Working with Sharma. Mixed up thoughts. He could have spoken but it was never too late. Tomorrow, another time would come. If Sagari were here ... He started to move, froze, then sat down again, thinking, wondering.

He turned on the laptop again. This wasn't work to be taken home; he needed the peace of an empty office as he searched. The riots, Gopal, The Magphur Star ... so many details to check. He'd worry about them tomorrow morning when this line of enquiry was done. Looking around him to check for watchers, he settled down to work.

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The house was quiet as he crept upstairs towards their bed. He unbuckled, unbuttoned his uniform, looking down at Sagari, long since asleep. She would have fed the boys, spoken with them across the table, pushed them towards their school tasks, checked their work before allowing them to watch television. All the time she would have been looking at her watch, thinking of the boys' bedtime and wondering whether he was safe. They had been together a long time through troubles and, just lately, harsh words. But she was there for him, in her own way.

He lay down gently beside her. Warm, safe. But still he was trembling. The meeting with Gopal was only a few hours away. Then he made his decision, quickly.

Chapter 28. **Sanjay.**

He wanted to enjoy these moments, this happiness, and not let it slip away to get lost amongst thoughts of work. The murders could wait. Seema had gone to rest but she was still moving around upstairs. He'd join her soon. The home would have to be changed. Space must be made for the new baby. The small store room could be converted with a bit of effort and he would make time to do that. Promotion would bring more money. Gopal's support would help but this was seeping away, bit by bit, each day. His mind returned uncomfortably to Thomas and Manish. He knew Gopal. Only results would bring the chance to move up and he wasn't near the end of this case yet.

Facts. Start with facts. Ralph Thomas had returned to Magphur after many years. He'd run away during the Magphur Riots leaving everything behind him. Doris. Everything. Over thirty years ago. Nearly his whole life. At first sight, Thomas's death was like so many others. A murder for quick wealth. But nothing had been taken. What was the motive, then? Simple hatred of Europeans? No, the murder was linked to something that had happened on the night of the riots. So much had happened on that night... murder and theft. Doris Seebold had made him certain that Thomas had seen something or done something which had changed his life for ever. That night was the key to everything. Gupta would find out by digging deep into the past.

And what about Manish? Manish had run with the gangs, that was clear. You had to face fear, face death when you chose that life. He knew. Sooner or later you'd be tested. Manish had not been made for such a way. There'd been no deep hunger in him, not really. He had been dispensed with, snuffed out like Rajid. The killings showed all of Mansoor's signs. The killing of a European, a murder which would shock. Mansoor still wanted to show power, spread fear as he had on the streets years ago. He enjoyed showing that he was above the law and could take anything even though he had everything. Surbjit had told him about the car, the apartment, the luxury ... Mansoor's comfort angered him. Seema had told him many times that he was obsessed. So much life taken up hating one man. The feeling was part of him, under his skin and buried

in his brain. There were other criminals to go after. Newer, younger men. To hell with them, Mansoor was his target. Gupta could do all the hard work looking back at the riots. He would go after Mansoor.

Murder was the best way of getting rid of loose tongues, wiping out those who knew too much. This was Mansoor's style, or had been before he'd started giving the killing work to others. There was complete loyalty. Gurinder, the others, would not let his name slip during interrogation...and there had been some hard questioning. Rajid Patel knew the gangs, Sashi had seen him in the streets. The idiot couldn't keep quiet, about anything, and had paid the price. He thought then of Rhiannon. He'd placed two officers outside her hotel room for protection and he felt sorry that she was a prisoner once more. Tomorrow he would question her again. She'd had enough time to think.

The bed creaked upstairs and he knew he should go to Seema. Again he'd forgotten the most important things. Leaving his pregnant wife alone and thinking of Mansoor! He'd make it up to her when all this was over.

Later, sitting on the edge of the bed, he was watching the light spreading across the ceiling. His busy mind had kept him from sleep. He stood up before reaching to pull the blankets over Seema. She slept on and he looked down at her for a while before turning to start the day. He had the energy to make it a good one. There'd be steps forward in the investigation, he knew it. He began preparing the strong tea which would make up his breakfast. Food could be grabbed later. Get this case over with, rid his life of Mansoor, and real happiness could begin. He stood up, stretched his arms above his head and then bent forward to touch the floor with his palms. Running and playing with a son would be good.

The day would be hot. Already the noise of the traffic horns was rising beyond the houses opposite and voices came from below. It had always felt safe in this part of town. Children could play in the narrow street with only carts getting in the way, maybe a motorcycle taking a shortcut sometimes. Yes, it was quiet here. This was home. The small hallway just off the street, the short staircase leading upstairs to the dining room

where they relaxed on the old, soft chairs in the evenings, the two bedrooms on the top floor. The store room between the bedrooms could be changed. The new baby would make him work harder.

When Mansoor was out of his life, he could again play Gopal's game of chasing quick results. The guilty could always be found and that would bring a higher rank, more money for the growing family. So many people had spoken about New Magphur – on the television, in the papers and on his phone – and he had accepted all this change, decided to make the best of it. The future could hold something for him. Gopal couldn't go on for ever. There would be new men in charge one day with different ways of doing things. Mansoor had changed with the times, Surbjit's report had shown him this. Maybe he should change too and get away from the streets to work behind a desk in one of those high, new buildings. Manish's killers, Ashwin, Gurinder and the one who had been the first to crack – all slumped in the cells – could tell him so much more, he was sure. Information which could end the Thomas case, at least help him find the man who pulled the trigger. That would be something. He closed the window on the noise. Mansoor couldn't get away, he was in every crime ... and right in the middle of his life. Any peace wouldn't last until he was brought down. And he'd do that soon.

He felt Seema's hand on his shoulder and his work thoughts disappeared. She could move so quietly. When he turned from the window to face her and put his hands gently on her shoulders he knew why he'd come back to Magphur. That old look made it easy for him to speak gently.

"I didn't mean to wake you. You should rest."

"Oh, and let the girls get themselves ready?" She mocked him pleasantly. "The kitchen would be a mess and they'd never get to school."

Calm silence lay between them as they moved to sit at the wooden table. No rushing this morning, he'd stay for a while. Gupta would cover for him. Good man.

"Well then, when you are alone you must sit quietly. Don't go walking in the heat."

“Sanjay, there’s food to be bought. I’d go mad sitting here all day. Now, fetch your tea and get ready or you’ll be late. You want food?”

He shook his head, started to move and then sat again. There were so many questions to ask her before the day started.

“The baby, how long have you known? Why didn’t you ...?”

She was suddenly active, bustling, moving towards the next room.

“We’ll talk later. The girls are moving. Now go, leave me in peace. I’ll be here when you get back.” Then she was gone.

He was alone again, listening to the family noises. It was time to leave. Tonight would be family time with no thoughts of work. He’d buy Seema a present.

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Gupta was not at the station, but with Gopal someone said. What the hell was that all about? Desk bound Pradha was enjoying his moments in charge. Well, he could get on with it. There were more important things to do than worry about the station. Giving orders that Gupta should phone him as soon as possible, he walked out.

He was standing at the point where Ralph Thomas had died. Waiting, scanning the crowd. Sometimes his uniform was a hindrance, it could scare people away, often the very people he wanted to see. Maybe he should have dressed casually today. He saw them.

The two beggars were shuffling towards the wall, bodies bent, the older one leaning heavily on his stick. The taller of the two, the younger one, turned to look at him, showing the faintest of smiles. The other, happy to be led, stared straight ahead at the wall. Together they squatted, taking up their shaded positions for the rest of the day. They’d move in the cool of the night.

Good. All as arranged. The bribe had been generous. No doubt more money would be handed over soon. Much of his street knowledge and time had been used up looking for these two. He moved towards them. Nothing unusual about a policeman facing beggars but still he looked for anyone watching too closely. These two had chosen their place well, everyone would see their outstretched hands here. He squatted to look into Mushtak's blank face, placing money in his palm.

"Mushtak, Kapil. You're both going to tell me about the Magphur Riots. I know you were both there. What happened in front of the Sikh Temple that night?

Kapil's gap toothed smile angered him, as did the hand thrust out to grasp money, but this was no time to show feelings. Or to reach into his pocket. Close up, the young beggar's face was surprisingly alive. His whole life spent on the streets alongside his uncle had made him sharp. Kapil knew how to survive.

"We've told much to your Sergeant Gupta. He told us you'd come ... said what you wanted to hear about. Said you'd be generous too."

"You'll get no more from me until you give me information. Talk now."

Kapil's smile froze, dark eyes hardening as his mind worked. For a few seconds it looked as if he wasn't going to speak. Then his voice was a throaty whisper.

"I was a boy at that time, but I remember. Uncle Mushtak's marks and noises have told me more. I'll tell you because we need more money. Then we can go away and hide somewhere in peace. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Show nothing. Keep quiet and let him speak.

"We were running, the two of us, the night when everyone was mad. My uncle led me in those days," the smile again, "now I pull him everywhere with me. There were fires. People were carrying off everything... to keep, to sell. There was a crowd by the Sikh temple in Ashwara Square, part of it was falling down in the fire. Aye, the heat! My uncle put his body between me and the flames, between me and the lathis. Then the

police fired at us. Many fell. Right next to us. We lay there and again my uncle put himself across me. All was still...”

So Gupta had been right, the police had opened fire on an unarmed crowd. A buried story in which Gopal was a hero. Still he kept quiet, heart beating, so that Kapil would continue.

“Then there was the man running, jumping over the bodies. He was carrying the statue from the temple. The flames made it shine in his arms. The man who was shouting, the officer, he stepped forward and shot him...” The memory stopped him talking.

“Go on, Kapil! Finish your story. I need to know the rest! Who else was there?” Too fast, too desperate ...

He watched Kapil smile again, reaching forward to take the money.

Chapter 29. Gopal.

Dealing with small minded idiots had become harder over the years. There was a time when his personal interest in a case would make men hurry up and get the job done. Rank meant everything. His will would push an investigation towards finding the guilty ones ... anyone guilty of anything would do. Cases were solved and forgotten then but it was so different now. Magphur was difficult to recognise. Too much concern with thoughts and feelings in the force. Too many people who were awkward to handle. There was a time when fear would make people want to please him and his word was the law. Good times! These days he had to answer too many questions of the wrong kind from the politicians above him and solve too many problems caused by policemen below him. He was accountable for everything and figures had to be shown!

His eyes opened as lights moved across the room's dark walls – walls covered with photographs, awards, glimpses of a career. The best room in his house, one which showed his past. The Magphur traffic still moved outside, less noisily but still enough to make a never ending hum. The cars' lights, sweeping the darkness, kept him awake, kept him thinking and stopped the exhaustion overtaking him. So tired! He'd smoked too many cigarettes. The sharp taste burned and warmed the back of his throat. Better cover the smell of his breath before going to bed. Jaswinder disapproved, even when he smoked in his own room.

That sergeant, Gupta, was a bloody fool, but a dangerous one. These days not many officers would be working that late, alone and from choice, unless they were pushing for promotion ... or on to something they could use. Gupta had never struck him as being ambitious, that's why he'd driven him out of his job. Problem was, with all the technology to be used, even a slug like Gupta could stumble on to things they didn't need to know. The sergeant looked to be giving all his attention to that laptop and the notebook had been full, dangerously full. How much had he told Sharma? Meeting with Gupta would give him the answer to that one. The past had become an open book and, by pressing a few buttons, any half-wit could own a piece of it. Things had moved too fast, even for him, and suddenly he felt older than ever.

Damn it, he'd misjudged Sharma! Hadn't expected him to be bothered by the truth... obsessed with bringing down Mansoor. Sharma had been a young thug and such instincts never disappeared. Or so he'd

thought. Bloody man should want an easy life with quick gains. The Thomas case should have been wrapped up, report filed and boxes ticked. And now Sharma couldn't be found, had been away from the station for hours at a time. Doing what? That was another worry. There were too many uncomfortable thoughts to take into retirement and this whole damned mess needed ending. After all his work for Magphur, he deserved a peace he could enjoy.

The phone buzzed and he stood up unsteadily before moving to the drawer. This second mobile had been a good idea. The secrecy, the hidden conversations, offended him but it was for the best. Once or twice Jaswinder and one of the cleaning girls had come close to finding the phone. He remembered the one he'd sacked for going into parts of the house where she shouldn't have been. The tension was part of the price he paid for helping the people of Magphur. Jaswinder always watched him with those wise eyes. Good woman. She knew everything but said nothing. Unlocking the drawer, fumbling, pushing aside papers, he picked up the mobile, breathing deeply to clear his head. The voice was the expected one.

"You called me. It'd better be important."

"Of course it is." He worked hard to keep his breathing level, controlled.

"I don't have much time. I'm entertaining. Don't worry, no-one can hear me at the moment."

He looked at his watch. Two o'clock in the morning and the bastard was entertaining. Probably some low-life hooker with more greed than brains. Tiredness gripped his whole body, another sign of age, but there could be no stopping now.

"Look, I need a problem solving. Yes, another problem. But, before you put the phone down, this problem is yours as well."

"How so?"

"I need the Thomas case closed. I need someone guilty. Soon." His voice tailed away. There was a noise upstairs. Jaswinder walking around looking for him?

“You have men on the case don’t you. Sharma?”

“I do. But he’s sticking his nose into all sorts of places, taking too long, and the people upstairs are starting to ask questions. The longer this takes the more questions they’ll ask and that should worry us both. We must meet.” He heard more movement somewhere in the house. “I can’t talk for much longer.”

“Keep calm, Ravi. You sound scared.”

“Not for myself, you understand, but for the good name of Magphur. Have you seen the papers? They’re *still* carrying stories about an English tourist found dead in an alleyway ...”

“Don’t worry, my friend, I’ll help you as always. Wait for my call. Now, please excuse me ...”

The line went dead.

“Ravi!”

Jaswinder’s voice. Ah, but she was a light sleeper. He turned to see her there, in the room, closer than expected, looking him up and down as she always did. He slid the phone into his back pocket. There was a time when he would have told her everything. She sounded lifeless, resigned.

“Ravi, you must come to bed. These late nights, the smoking, will kill you.”

She spoke more truth than she knew. And she didn’t deserve this secrecy, these nighttime lies. They shared a past. All those years of standing at his side throughout all those endless receptions and parties, smiling and talking him up. All those words spoken to people who mattered, justifying – no, not justifying, “contextualising” - the things he had done, all to better Magphur. She should have been a politician with a career of her own. What could he say to her now? The truth, the whole truth ...? Many years too late for that. Say something.

“Don’t worry, Jas.” He smiled. “We’ll sleep now.”

*

7.30 am. He had been up and about for over half an hour, leaving Jaswinder in bed, to follow his usual routine. The short night's sleep had refreshed him and he felt even better now that he was moving. He thrust his arms upward, fingertips towards the ceiling, and leaned back as far as he could. Then, bending forward swiftly, he placed his palms flat on the floor, feeling his pyjama waistband bite into his belly. Blood pounded in his head, in his ears. Yoga, his morning session, kept his joints alive. Shame it couldn't stop all the signs of ageing. Maybe he should pay another visit to the Ashram. A perfect place to gain peace and to hide for a while.

Now his body was stiff, supported by his hands and toes. Next, the Cobra, his waist and groin touching the floor whilst his upper body arched upwards like a snake preparing to strike. He slumped. Two rounds of the sun salutations was enough. To hell with it. Peace was needed before the day began. He moved to sit cross legged on the floor, hands on knees, eyes closed, inhaling, exhaling, to clear his brain. No good. His mind was racing, preparing for a call which might never come.

Coming out of the pose, he lay back on the mat to look up at the ceiling. This room was his space and Jaswinder never bothered him here. To calm himself, he closed his eyes and pictured the layout. Unlike everywhere else in the house, the walls were plain white: no tapestries, wallpaper or colour. The wall bars were to his left, with the punch bag just in front of them. The running machine was on his right side, there to be used at the end of each day. The rowing machine was new, the latest model, much admired by his friends. He always joked to them that he could row for miles in this room. Yet, he'd only been on the water once, on the boating lake at Chandigarh. Jaswinder had laughed at his efforts to hold the oars then and at his fear of the water. There was a photograph of her helming when she'd studied at IBS in New York before he met her. He loved that picture. Sails behind her, head back, laughing in the wind. Maybe their lives would meet again one day and they'd travel together.

The phone vibrated next to him and moved on the wooden floor. Sitting up, heart beating, he grabbed for it and checked the number. Any attempt to find peace had ended with the phone's buzzing.

“Club Mahindra in an hour.” The voice was clipped and business-like. “Let’s get this done before the day starts.”

No need for more words, this was routine. Swiftly, he got up and moved towards the door. He’d asked Bipan to lay out his business suit ready beside his uniform. Civilian clothes would be better and he’d come back for his uniform later. Jaswinder would have finished the breakfast which was always delivered to her in bed. Just time for a shower, then he’d grab breakfast at The Mahindra although he probably wouldn’t eat much. Never did at these meetings. All being well, he would still make it back for another chat with Gupta. The man could still be useful. It felt good to be active, thinking. Maybe he wasn’t so old. Jaswinder was standing by her bedroom door in the red robe.

“Good morning, Jas.” He spoke lightly, affectionately.

But she smiled tightly, turned away, and moved towards the prayer room. Perhaps she’d find her own peace there.

*

The gunshot, muffled by the earphones, was still loud enough to make him flinch. He understood why he’d been brought to this part of The Mahindra. There were just the two of them here whilst everyone else was breakfasting. His stomach rumbled and he looked through the thickened glass to the full restaurant. Clay pigeon shooting was not a usual morning activity, even though it was the best time of the day to be moving. A well cut suit was the best thing to wear in the elegant surroundings of The Mahindra Club ... a slice of the old world, dripping with wealth. He liked it. The carpets, the curtains and the ornate tables topped with crisp tablecloths reeked of Empire. No, he didn’t just like it, he loved the sight of this place. It had survived, become a playground for rich travellers and business people. He’d been careful enough with his money to become a regular when meetings like this were part of his past. All that mattered at The Mahindra was how you looked and how quickly you could pay.

“Ravi, you look tense. Relax. No-one will disturb us here. Five more shots and I’m all yours. Pull!”

The clay disc flew from the trap, arced up and was shattered, quickly and efficiently. The noise hung in the warm morning air. This was repeated four more times. Three hits, one miss. The last pigeon flew and landed to their left on the edge of the vast lawn. The marksman cursed quietly, broke the gun and handed it to the bowing attendant. The meeting could begin.

“Ach, I must be losing my touch, Ravi. Come, sit with me.”

This place had class but he felt threatened by the shooting. This had better be a short meeting. Tea, coffee, water and juice had been set on the outside table. Helping himself from the jug of iced water, he sat beside his companion. The lawn, the pool, the tennis courts were all quiet and perfect. The servant in the background was dismissed with a quick flick of his hand. They were alone.

“So, Ravi. You wanted to talk to me. Another favour?”

He looked at his watch again, cursing himself for showing nerves, and spoke.

“My friend, I think we can work even more closely together this time.” Good. A confident start. “Sharma ...”

Mansoor’s laughter was like another gunshot.

“Ha, I know what you want, Ravi. First, you want me to serve up the one who killed the man Thomas to make you look good. Sorry, my friend, I know nothing about that. Then you want me to get Sharma out of your way. Again, I’m not just some street heavy who clears up mess. I’m a businessman, remember.”

“Look, we both know that Sharma ...” Calm, calm Ravi. Don’t rush your words.

“Sharma getting too close for comfort, eh? Digging too deeply into your past? Don’t worry, my friend, he’s as good as dead. But you must be patient. First, there are things which must be done. Oh, nothing to do with you.” Mansoor leaned towards him, and there was no laughter. “This started long before the two of us sat down together. I’m telling you straight, I’m going to humiliate him and, believe me, I know exactly how

to do it. Like a tiger stalking its prey. Yes, exactly like that. The kill will come when I decide and the style of it will please us both. Don't worry, you'll have a part to play but this whole thing is bigger than you." The smile returned. "Now, you must take breakfast with me. No more business talk between old friends."

He watched Mansoor clap his hands for service. There'd be no further words of any kind, he knew. No rubbing out Sharma so that there would be peace. This hadn't been a meeting ... he'd been toyed with and put in his place. Things were getting beyond his control. Any feeling of hunger slid away.

When breakfast came he sat, holding his empty glass, watching Mansoor gobbling his food like a vulture perched on a carcass.

Chapter 30. Rehman.

He looked in disgust at the shivering little man sitting in front of him. Ten past nine and he should be at the office. This was dragging on too long ... again. He felt himself staring at Sashi as he slurred and mumbled out his pieces of useless information. The idiot had served his purpose, such as it was, and been paid, but still he rambled on. He'd obviously been smoking himself out of his mind. The hole in his shirt was even bigger, the eyes half shut and the hands moved restlessly, as he leaned forward expecting more money to feed his filthy habit. By all accounts his bus was always empty these days. The boy was a mess, with the morals of a rat, ready to throw dirt at his friend Sharma until there was no more to be thrown. But then, this whole business – bribing, finding secrets smelled of the gutter and only the strongest would survive. Mansoor would always be around, so would he. It was people like Sashi, the little men, who would go under. So be it. He thought about his next step, then held up his hand for silence.

“Sashi, thank you. Much of what you’ve said will be most useful. I’ll pay you a fair price for this information, but it must be our last meeting. People will wonder why you are coming here so often. More than some of my other clients.” He smiled pleasantly, firmly, switching on the expression he always used to end meetings.

He walked towards the armchair where his jacket lay creased. He'd ordered a new suit, blown a hole in his cash but smartness was always worth it. Turning his back on Sashi, he slid his hand into the silk pocket. It would be a mistake to let the miserable little asshole see him pull out the notes. Five hundred rupees. Too much, but at least he wouldn't have to hear the whining voice again. He returned the wallet to its pocket and rolled the money into his fist just as Sashi spoke again. The kid would not give up!

“Then there was the meeting with Jagdish Sohar. I heard ... I saw ...”

Sashi looked at him then, his smile widening, as if he knew that a point had been scored. The boy was cunning as well as desperate. Damn it! Jagdish Sohar. This was a name from his files, a name which often cropped up when he spoke with Mansoor. Sighing, he returned to his seat opposite Sashi, his fist still closed

around the money. Keep calm, don't show too much interest or the dopehead will start trying to haggle again, maybe he would even start shouting as he did once before.

"Take your time, Sashi, and tell me more. Are you saying that Sharma met with Jagdish Sohar?"

This was getting complicated. His mind wandered as Sashi's shaking hand reached for the glass of water on the small table beside him. Jagdish Sohar. He had seen the look on Mansoor's face when this name had been spoken. That time, in this apartment, when Mansoor had received the call, the one about the missing drugs. Sohar's name had been spat out then, the phone thrown to one side. Jagdish Sohar was an operator who could match Mansoor and hurt him badly; he was one who had stayed on the streets, making no attempt at outward respectability. He worked in shadows, not in glass walled offices. Sashi, dribbled as he spoke, anxious to spill words.

"Sah, the two have met often. I've seen this. Jagdish Sohar is one of Sanjay Sharma's informers and they've known each other for many years.

He leaned back looking at the ceiling, anything to gather his thoughts. Sharma using one of Magphur's main criminals! No wonder Sohar had managed to survive for so long. No accusation ever stuck to him. Sharma protecting Sohar in return for information. Something could be made of that, true or not. No stopping Sashi now.

"I'm not the only one who has seen Jagdish Sohar meet with ... San ... Sharma. Many people know that the two have spoken. But it was me who got close enough to hear their words."

The man was low life, nailing Sharma again and again to get money. Okay, he'd be doing the same by passing information to Mansoor for much more money, but Sharma wasn't a friend. Come on, it was too late for a moral debate now.

“I was walking back from sitting and talking with friends and there was the car, Sharma’s car. I know it well. It was by one of the last alleyways in the old town. Not that far from his home. I stood by the entrance. No-one could see me. I heard voices.”

“And you know these voices? You’re sure.”

“I’d recognise Sharma’s voice anywhere. We’ve spoken together so many times.” There was a pause, deep breaths. “When you live like me, you must watch for every chance to make money. I thought there would be things I could learn, something you would pay me for, something of value for your work.”

“Maybe you wanted to speak to Sharma? Ask him for more help, eh? He’s helped you many times I think.” Sashi’s eyes blinked as a nerve was touched. “But then you recognised the other person, didn’t you?” He was a cross-examining lawyer haranguing a witness. “Go on, Sashi. I’m listening.”

Sashi took another long gulp of water and settled again.

“Okay, maybe I just wanted to speak to Sharma, to get some help, anything. But then, like you said, I saw Jagdish Sohar and I tell you I was as scared as ever. I’ve seen what he can do to anyone who ...”

“But you stayed and listened, took a risk for the money. So, come on, tell me what was said.”

“It sounded like Sohar was talking about Mansoor, about him looking for something or somebody. Watching the airport and the tourist areas. Anyway, they said they’d meet again. Didn’t sound like it was the first time they’d spoken...” The voice faded away.

“And you’re sure you heard the name Mansoor?”

“Definitely. I didn’t hang around after that. I got out of there.”

Silence. This story would interest Mansoor. He needed time alone to think, other work could wait. Clearing his throat, he spoke lightly.

“Thank you, Sashi. This is useful and I’ll think about what you’ve told me. If I need any other information I’ll contact you. You’ve done well. Here.”

Taking the money out of his pocket, he straightened the notes between his palms before passing them across towards Sashi’s unsteady hand. The rupees moved quickly away from his fingers for Sashi to count them on his lap. He wanted to push the fumbling fool from his office but the raw greed was fascinating.

“Sah, this can’t be all the money. I risked everything by going down that alley to listen. I think that ...”

Enough. There was no time for this. Standing, he moved swiftly towards Sashi. Two steps and he was bending towards the driver’s face his finger pointing directly at the watery eyes and his voice spluttering.

“Now listen to me you piece of back alley shit. You think you’re the only one who needs to live. You think that no-one else takes risks to get what they want. You’re damned lucky to have this money in your pocket.” He straightened up. “Anyway, soon you’ll be lying unconscious somewhere, out of your head, with no worries. So don’t come here expecting me to pay for your pleasures. Your work is done, our business is finished. Now go!”

He half expected Sashi to rise and push past him, just like he’d tried once before. Well, this time he was ready. But no, the little rat just got up, staring back at him, shaking, before turning to leave, the money clutched to his chest. A warning was needed.

“Oh, and Sashi. Speak to no-one about our meeting, not to family or friends. Keep your head down. Believe me, I know men who would slit your throat and dump you in the river. Then where would your family and business be, eh?”

The door closed and he was glad to be alone once more. He felt much better after sounding off at Sashi. Tired though, like after a hard session in his gym. That squealer wouldn’t last long. His own angry words could be a prophecy and Sashi would indeed end up as another blood soaked corpse, remembered simply as someone who smoked too much and couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

He walked to the window and looked thoughtfully at the building site far below. Information, the new Magphur currency, people would pay, kill for it and use it to gain power, at least for a while. For now he was useful to Mansoor but that couldn't last for ever. He was being used just as much as Sashi and maybe that had sparked his anger.

Such thoughts had to be left. Mansoor had helped him to wealth, influence, and was someone whose friendship should be cultivated, not avoided. Yes, Mansoor would always have need of a man like him, especially these days. There was still room for fear, though.

Sanjay Sharma and Jagdish Sohar. A bombshell. Sohar was suspected of being behind many crimes: murder, extortion and drug trafficking. Somehow, though, he had served only a few short terms in prison. Minor stuff. His helpers always paid the price for him. The cases, the trials were well documented. Sohar always managed to slither free with the best legal advice and support. If Sharma played a part in all that ... Whether he had or not, Mansoor would pay well to ensure that any suspicion of double dealing would stick. That would bring Sharma down, put him back in the gutter or worse. Then he could end this damned project.

Picking up his brief case, throwing on his jacket and smoothing it down, he moved towards the apartment exit, trying hard to think himself respectable again.

Chapter 31 Surbjit.

He'd been watching the tower block for many days. Nothing. Oh, Mansoor had come and gone in that great car without even a glance in his direction. Gupta had passed by, nodded, tossed him a coin to keep it real and then moved off. Many times people had shouted at him, aimed kicks and told him to get back to his own part of the city. Walking and thinking in this strange place, that was his day. His rest came when he squatted at the street corner to stare up at Mansoor's shining windows. Speaking with Mansoor felt like years ago. His parents would be missing him again and this hurt. His energy, his smile, came and went.

With a sigh, he let himself slump forward, head on arms, tired of watching. The long black car wasn't coming anyway. This was no life, caught between Sharma and Mansoor. It was better being his own master on the market. He'd be an even bigger boss with Manish gone. The coins which people threw at him weren't enough. Some of them had come from Gupta. The main money had come from Mansoor and Sharma had never offered him anything real.

So why hadn't he gone running over to Mansoor's car when it had appeared? There'd been a few chances but he'd stayed where he was. The lady in the red sari was Sharma's wife, Seema, and she knew both men. So confusing! This Seema could be spying on Mansoor, like him, but no, Sharma couldn't do that. A man wouldn't use his wife like that. Once, Sharma had mentioned daughters. Two of them. Seema couldn't have spent much time with Mansoor, she'd be looking after the house, the family; yet he'd seen her there, standing close to him as if she really knew him. She was with a man her husband hated! These people were mad.

Walk away and let these people live in their own mess. When he was bigger, stronger, then would be the time to revenge Manish. Mansoor was too strong for Sharma. Money and power had turned him into a giant who could buy his way out of any problem. Well, everything was clear to him. Forget Sharma and his wandering wife. He could become Mansoor's dumb servant for a time, do his jobs, take his money, until he was old and wise enough to know how to kill.

He lifted his head to look down at the money spread out on the floor in front of him. Money earned without moving, something to show for his time, but he needed more. Swiftly he scraped it up and pushed it into his pocket. Then he saw it, the big black car across the street. Standing tall, touching his money, he got himself ready for work. Mansoor would appear when the driver opened the car door for him.

“Surbjit!”

Bloody Gupta! Not now, not now, just when he’d got his head together. There was the hand on his shoulder and the face so well known to him.

“Surbjit, your job’s done. Come with me now. Captain Sharma wishes to speak with you.”

The words were low but clear as the crowd moved around them. He could see that Gupta expected him to follow straight away. No, this time he wouldn’t follow.

“If I’m not needed then I’ll go straight home from here to my family. Tell Captain Sharma I’ll see him tomorrow. There’s nothing to report.”

Gupta’s eyes narrowed without anger, for once not looking like a fool. Across the road. Mansoor, followed by his driver and a boy carrying two brief cases, entered the door of the apartment block. Chance gone. Gupta still watched him.

“Surbjit, come. We mustn’t keep Captain Sharma waiting.”

He followed Gupta like a loser. He should run home, talk to his father about plans for the stall. But no, maybe it really was time to see Sharma again.

Sharma wanted information and he’d get it.

*

Gupta took him to an office and sat in the far corner watching him. Time dragged, but he didn’t care. The door opened and a policeman brought a jug of water and left it on the table. The noise of voices came

through the open door and then all was quiet. He was thirsty, but didn't drink. Waiting again. Sharma was keeping him there just because he could - all the time taking things from him: his work, his pride. But the waiting would be worth it. The story was in his head, ready to be used.

"He's a good man, you know."

Gupta's voice made him jump. More talk, just to keep him sweet and smiling. Well, he wasn't going to listen any more. He kept his eyes on the floor sensing that Gupta had moved to stand over him.

"Sharma, he's okay. He's working to make this place better. He trusts you, and he doesn't trust many people."

"It's *Captain* Sharma. Didn't you know that?" He heard his own voice, knife sharp, ready to cut where he could.

"You know, Surbjit, for a long time I hated Captain Sharma. I could have done him harm ... easily. I had my chances too. This morning I could have ... He took my job, my honour and, for a while, I thought I was there to run around for him, just to make him look good. But then I began to see differently ... see myself more clearly."

No he wasn't ready for such peace. Not yet. It didn't suit his mood.

"So what did *Captain* Sharma do? Tell you how good you are? Make you feel like a big man? Very nice for you."

Good. He could see Gupta's face tightening. So much pain around, the fat cop should have a share. But still the words rumbled, unchanging and clear.

"Surbjit, you're still getting over Manish. Believe me, the anger is part of that. This feeling will go in a while. I know these things."

He felt something burst inside him. No-one knew, no-one could know. Manish was there in his mind as he stood, knocking over the wooden chair, moving forward to push at Gupta's stomach as though trying to make him go away.

“Don't tell me that you know, you bloated dog. I didn't get a chance to talk to Manish, to make things better between us. All he wanted was to help the family. People like us do that. You have money, a place where you can spread out. How much are you going to pay me for what I have lost, eh? For all the time I have spent begging, seeing someone who you call a bad man living like a god. Answer me, *Sergeant Gupta*...”

He stood back, tired as though he had run through the streets for a long time. At least Gupta had stopped talking.

The door opened and Sharma was there. He felt this before turning to look.

“What's going on, Sergeant?” Sharma was staring at him looking as if he was seeing something unexpected.

“Sah, he's gone mad ... he turned on me suddenly.”

They'd sit him down and make themselves sound kind, all to make him do the things they wanted. No more. Then he was running, dodging outstretched hands. The open door was in front of him and suddenly the way was clear. He could get past the people in the corridor and the hall, through the entrance and into the street he knew. No-one could catch him. Then he felt a hand at the back of his neck, another gripping his right shoulder, dragging him back into the room towards the wooden chair like a criminal. Trapped, cornered like an animal. The door slammed shut. He wouldn't make it easy for them.

Spinning away from Sharma, he stood with his back to the wall. Gupta had looked shocked and beaten when he had shouted the truth at him like a punch. Sharma's turn. The words croaked in his throat, but then came the rush of sound.

“Captain Sharma! You know where your wife is, eh? I’ve seen her. Want to know where? Inside Mansoor’s building. Not just standing watching like me. No! She was talking to him. They were very friendly ...”

“Surbjit, stop. This won’t help. I have something to tell you. Listen to me...”

Sharma wouldn’t stop him, not this time. When he’d had his say he’d leave this place for ever and live his own life with what was left of his family. But first ...

“I watched them. Mansoor and Seema.” He dragged the woman’s name from his memory. Had it been Sharma who’d spoken her name? Like a sharp stick poking a wound, he found the target. “They were there, together, smiling at each other ... before they went upstairs, you know, to the place I told you about. Mansoor’s place...”

The world exploded then. Small lights and pain as the world fell away, spinning. The ground saved him, stopped his fall. He spat out the bitter, sticky stuff which had suddenly filled his mouth. Blurred sounds were all around him, sounds which could be words fading into the distance. He started to sink, like when he had jumped into the river to swim out to the raft Manish had made. It looked like Manish was standing on the water, calling to him. The brown water had closed over his head filling his ears, his eyes, and muffling his voice. When he had pushed his head above the water, spitting out salt and grit, Manish too had dived in so that he could not see his big brother. He’d cried then and he cried in pain now.

Slowly, he felt his head clearing and he stopped his tears. Things began to make sense. Scuffling feet, a thud as the door closed. Darkness. Someone had hit him. Gupta or Sharma? Whoever it was had not held back. It didn’t matter because he could walk away from this place. Slowly, slowly he began to push himself up from the hard floor.

When he fell back for the third time he knew that he needed help.

Chapter 32. Seema.

The front room was quiet, shady and cool, always the best place to sit. This was her favourite time of day. Her time. Two hours before the yellow school bus would pull up at the end of the street to bring the girls home. Last year she would have joined the parents - people on foot, on motor scooters - going to the bus stop to meet the children. Now the girls were old enough to make their own way through the crowds. They were growing up at a pace which made her smile, but which also made her sad sometimes. Both girls liked working out Maths problems. Sanjay had joked that they would both make good detectives. She'd prefer them to study business with more money and perhaps less worry. For the family's sake it was time to leave Magphur. She'd speak to Sanjay about this.

Sanjay had changed in many puzzling ways. Life for him was heavy and painful and seeing him try to hide this hurt her every day. Work was draining him. He'd always been good at judging people's moods, knowing how to make them like him and work with him. Never lost for words when they were young, she'd seen his quiet moods grow longer recently. Family time, Sanjay was good at that, much better than she'd expected him to be when they were younger. The children listened to him as he made them laugh and she loved to watch this. There was no hidden anger at these times, his moods didn't jump, he was always kind and ready to smile through the tiredness. Only she could see the strain behind the smile. Every day she wondered what he was like at the police station, always hoped that he was holding himself together. The effort he made to leave his work outside the house gave her more guilt about her secret.

And now the family would grow. She touched her stomach with both hands and her thoughts became tender again. Always, happiness and worry together. The other women looked at her whenever she walked to buy food. Seema, you're so lucky, the girls so beautiful, your husband such a man of respect, your home so clean and full of space. They appeared pleasant, friendly but she wondered if any of them knew about the meetings ...had perhaps seen her. She'd thought about cutting out conversations with the neighbours. No, it was better to keep natural, smiling. Sanjay hid his worries from the girls and she would too.

Then there were the nights. Still, sometimes, he woke up sweating, eyes open, seeing nothing. It was good when exhaustion made him sleep more deeply. Most nights, after the girls had gone to bed, he wrapped himself up in his own thoughts and this unsettled her. For hours he went about his life and she went about hers. They'd look and smile at each other, but they didn't talk deeply any more. The child would change everything... maybe.

Any distance between them was her fault. No good looking at things a different way just to make herself feel better. Face facts! She'd met Mansoor in secret, spoken with him in his place and kept this from her husband. This was the sin which she must pay for ... was paying for.

The first sight of Mansoor had been a shock. Of course, she knew of his success, that he was a powerful man in the new city, perhaps everywhere. Yet she'd expected to recognise him, to see signs of the same boy from years ago. Alright, so the suit was a different look. But the person standing there looked more ... more frightening behind the well thought out appearance. The suit, so smart, couldn't hide the spreading fat though. He'd been like a stick when they were young! Always on the move like a wild animal. She'd turned away without speaking and there had been no meeting although he'd probably seen her disappearing into the crowd. There had been several times like that... seeing but not speaking. It had been easier to think about the past, to play with it in her mind, rather than to step back into it.

Yet their first meeting for many years had happened, there on the street as he walked to his car. His power had been plain to see that time. People were trying to catch his attention, to ask him questions and favours, but he made straight for her. His opening words were smooth and prepared as though he'd been waiting for her. Mansoor still looked and talked as if he owned the streets but now he was like a bear, not one of those performing ones which sometimes came to the market, but one which still lived in the wild and moved slowly and dangerously. She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. Anyway, she'd been confused and the words which came out of her mouth weren't the ones which were in her mind. Going over that conversation had become a habit of hers whenever she sat alone. This was part of her guilt and so was the

memory of putting on her best clothes to meet him. She'd told herself that she'd put on her finest sari because she was going into the new part of the city and not to impress him. But she wasn't sure.

"Seema! It's really you? I wondered when we would meet..."

Always so confident, as though he could make anything happen by posing and strutting around. She started to smile at this but stopped herself. The man beside him, the driver, had moved people away, making space. She'd backed away from him, she remembered, but he'd stopped her.

"Don't worry." He laughed the old laugh. "It's always like this. I've got so many deals going, too many appointments. Everyone wants a piece of my time."

"Mansoor ...," but he wasn't listening.

"We can't talk here. So good to see you after all these years." He moved closer, his rings, the bracelet, glinting as his hand pointed towards the building behind him. "Visit me in my apartment. I can make time for you. Besides, I want to talk to you about the old days. How's Sanjay, eh? Still walking the streets in that shiny uniform." His laughter had risen above the noise around them, head tilted back, and she'd become angry so that her next words had been stronger, louder.

"Mansoor, I want to talk to you too. Not about old times, but about Sanjay and you. It won't take long. I'm not coming to your room. We can talk here."

"Here? There's no peace here. At least come into the reception. It's cool there and I can get you a drink."

Her look answered him. She'd shown her will, and this thought gave her pleasure now. But he hadn't given up.

"Well then, you must see my car. We'll talk as my driver shows us around this fine, new city. I'll cancel my morning appointments. Come on, this will be a new experience for you."

“We can’t be long, Mansoor. I need to be home.” All the time, she had been moving towards the car. The driver had smiled and bowed to her.

“Seema, trust me.” One of his favourite phrases.

She’d enjoyed the journey! It shamed her to think this after all that had happened since. The comfortable, leather seats, the cool air, the patterns made by the sun reflecting from the high buildings. None of it beautiful, just different and an escape from the nightmares, the worry about Sanjay. Mansoor had leaned towards her with those soft words. Then, with an effort, she’d spoken about Sanjay in her strongest voice.

“This must stop. You and Sanjay. I know he thinks of you all the time. He’s hunting you. And you want to bring him down. Don’t deny it. Neither of you will rest until you destroy each other. It’s like you’re both still fighting each other. You were friends once. Now you must go about your business and he must go about his. Your worlds are so different ...” Those eyes had made her strength fade.

“I mean your husband no harm. You’ve seen that I live a busy life. There’s no time to think about the past.” His hands had been spread wide in a gesture of peace, the face smooth, innocent.

Then his phone had rung. His business tones had been sharp, high pitched and she was alone again watching people brush against the car bonnet as they crossed the road.

“Seema, I must go. My clients won’t wait for me any more. We’ll take you to a convenient place not far from your home. I know where you live. Please, let’s meet again soon. I promise I’ll consider all that you’ve said.”

Walking back towards her own neighbourhood, she’d ignored everything around her, speaking to no-one. This had become her habit since that first time.

This waiting for Sanjay in her silent home was the worst time of all. How stupid to think that Mansoor had been considering anything apart from himself. Conversations, all of them going the same way. She pleading, Mansoor considering, keeping her waiting. The apartment, like the car, had taken her breath away.

Her mind raced. Sanjay would be here soon. Sanjay had always been in her mind, hadn't he? Even on that evening when the visit with Mansoor had gone on for far longer than she'd meant it to she'd run home, late, taking every short cut she knew, anxious to see her children. She'd seen Mansoor only once since then. Briefly. Finally, she'd been strong and it was over. The words of that last meeting were buried deep inside her.

Suddenly the girls were there, Sural laughing the loudest, and within minutes she became lost in her family - food, school news and preparation for Sanjay's return. She should forget Mansoor. Except ...

Later, as the darkness spread outside, she allowed herself to sit. No sign of Sanjay, no call to say that he'd be late. The girls' laughter filled the house but couldn't take away her feeling of growing dread.

Chapter 33. Sanjay.

His mind had been clear at first. Find Mansoor at the top of his apartment block. Simple. No hiding behind rules, or the uniform. Kill the bastard and end it all now: Mansoor's life, his own career and maybe even the nightmares. But he had stopped the car at the side of the road overlooking the new building work. Slowly his thoughts gathered and took shape. Nothing was definite about Seema and Mansoor. All he knew was that Surbjit had spoken in anger and he'd hit him blindly. That was all. He didn't need these mixed-up feelings just when some peace had come. The way ahead with the case was right in front of him. He had it. He knew those who were guilty. A little more work and he could bring Mansoor down...legally. And now this! Why had Surbjit turned on him? He could have given the boy a better way of life. Did Surbjit really think that he was using him? Gupta had said that it was the grief speaking and maybe there was something in that ...

Seema with Mansoor! The thought made him sick and the pictures in his mind drove him mad. Seema and Mansoor had never been together, had they? Seema had come to him long ago. Mansoor hadn't stood a chance, this was something he'd always known. Seema hadn't spoken to him about any meetings with Mansoor. If she'd kept such things from him there'd been a lie in the room with them as they sat playing with their daughters. His married life had been a lie! No, no ... think like a policeman and find evidence. All he had were the words of a boy who was out of his mind and he needed more: more information, more time to think. Seema, he must talk to Seema. An image of Surbit lying there came to him. He'd seen the fall and then left without looking back leaving Gupta to take care of any damage. Gupta, always reliable, always sorting things out. The change in him had been good to see and he knew Gupta was his man. Yes. Seema would explain everything and he'd get some peace back.

Breathing deeply, clearing his thoughts, he started up the car. Think about home and think about the girls. Everything would be the same in his house and all this was a dream which would pass like all the others. A quick, high pitched laugh escaped from his lips. He felt like a madman in the middle of chaos. Cars crowded around him, horns hooting as he drove.

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The house was still the same. The car clock told him how much time had slipped away. He hated routine but he needed familiar things around him now. The anger and the hate had gone but maybe this numbness was worse.

The girls ran to meet him and he spoke the same words as he always did. The worn phrases fell from his lips without any thinking.

“Was your day good?”

“Yes, I’ll look at your work. Both of you, show me.”

“Mandeep. Sural. Time for bed now. Your mother and I need some peace to talk about you.”

The smile which always went with these words wasn’t there tonight. Seema was difficult to look at as she helped clear away school books.

Then they were alone in the silence. The words wouldn’t come and so the silence continued.

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How much time had passed? Did it matter? He looked at the darkness outside and then, finally, spoke. No more lies. Still she wouldn’t look at him.

“Seema ... You’ve been meeting with Mansoor. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He’d spoken like an old man, sharp and cruel. Seema was his childhood, his life and it shouldn’t be like this. She was shaking but she held his gaze and, in those few seconds, his love was strong. She would never hide from him. But why had she hidden before? This was stupid...

“Sanjay, I’ve told you many times that I can’t watch you trying to finish Mansoor, carrying on your war. It’s killing me. He knows your every move and he can destroy you. Easily. I’ve seen how he lives, seen the men he surrounds himself with. He hates you as much now as he did on the streets when we were young. I ...”

No, this was not going to be about Seema protecting him from Mansoor. There was more to their meetings than she was telling him and much more that he had to discover. A detective trying to find the truth about his own wife in the family home! The thought almost made him laugh.

“How many times did you meet?”

“I don’t know... Sanjay, it doesn’t matter now.”

“How many times, Seema. Once, twice, three times? More ...”

“I met with him many times. I didn’t count.”

“Many times? How long does it take for you to tell him to stay away from us? Where did you meet him?”

“In his car, in his apartment ...”

A point had been reached and he felt the anger flowing through his body again. He took a step forwards, only stopping when she gestured above her. The girls were sleeping upstairs. He dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper.

“In his ... Don’t you know that you were seen! My wife going to another man’s home ...alone?”

Her eyes glinted and he felt the force of her quiet rage.

“So what’s more important, eh? That we have some peace in the future or that the wife of the great Sanjay Sharma is seen in the company of another man? You always said that you trusted me, that I was more than just someone to keep your home ...”

“Seema, you said nothing to me ... Nothing in a murder case which involves Mansoor.”

“If I had, you’d have stopped me. Yes you would! Because, underneath you’re just the same as every other man. Captain Sanjay Sharma, so clever that he chooses his own rules, the man who knows people ... how they think, how they behave. You didn’t see this coming did you? You didn’t think that your little wife

would think for herself, take matters into her own hands, just to protect her stupid, pig-headed husband who cares only for his work. I tell you, Sanjay Sharma, you are living in the past. Underneath that uniform, you're still the gutter boy living on his wits, fighting the world. Well, this time the problem is with you, inside your own home. I tell you, you and Mansoor are just the same. The same person! And I can't live like this any more!"

He watched her go upstairs without turning to look at him.

Slumping into Seema's chair, his mind raced. Surbjit had not spoken just in anger and neither had Seema. They believed their own words. Seema's love had always been there in the way she looked after the house and the family. She'd helped him through the difficult times and held him as he shivered and twisted in the night, trying to escape the flames. Had all that been false? What had he done wrong? No, she was the one who should feel guilt, sneaking off to see Mansoor without telling him. And Surbjit. He'd seen the way the boy looked up to him. The change had been sudden, all that talk of being used had come from nowhere. Or maybe not. It was when Surbjit had met Mansoor that he began to change. Seema too. What had she and Mansoor talked about? He had hit Surbjit hard, as hard as he had ever hit anyone on the streets...standing alongside Mansoor beating hell out of some faceless stranger.

The next thought cut him like a blade; the thing he'd pushed back again and again. As a detective, there were facts to find, no jumping to conclusions. Now he had all the information he needed, about everything. There was no doubt. Mansoor and Seema had been together. She couldn't fool him with her talk of protecting him. The child wasn't his! He could check, very easily, but he knew already. The evidence was there.

Then he was walking away from his house, away from his family, to lose his thoughts on the streets where she'd told him he belonged.

Chapter 34. Gupta.

Surbjit lay hunched against the wall sobbing. He'd never seen him cry before, not even for his brother. Several times he watched him try to rise before sliding down to the floor again. It was difficult to think of anything to say and impossible to move. Everything had been turned upside down in a few seconds: the blow, the shouted words, Sharma walking out. He'd not expected any of that. The shock was so great. True, Surbjit had gone too far, but the savagery of the punch had taken his breath away. Stepping in front of Sharma, stopping him kicking the boy's head in, had been unreal. Perhaps that was the real Sharma. He'd have lost his mind if someone spoke about Sagari in that way but Sharma had closed in on Surbjit with real danger in his eyes.

Surbjit groaned again and looked up through watery, red eyes. The right side of his face, his jaw, was horribly swollen and, even in the room's dimmed light, the purple and blotched skin stood out. His face was a mess. Come on, time to get moving. Going to the door, he called into the corridor and soon a young policewoman was sitting near Surbjit. She might be able to give the boy more sympathy while he planned his next move. There were things to see to.

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Later, back in the room, he dismissed the girl, poured a mug of water from the jug and moved to squat down beside Surbjit. The day had been so full of shouting and paperwork that he'd almost forgotten the shameful scene. That had been hours ago!

"Here," he said gently. "Drink this."

He watched Surbjit slowly take the mug and move it to his twitching lips before taking a careful sip. With a cough, the water fell from his mouth and he threw the mug away from him so that it clattered and splashed in the far corner of the room. At least he had some spirit left.

"Surbjit," he said leaning closer. "Get up. You don't want to stay in the police station. Come, I'll help you home and speak to your parents." The next words needed care. "Tomorrow you can meet with Captain

Sharma and make your peace. He won't be happy with what happened. You shouldn't have spoken in that way."

"I ...spoke the truth. I saw ..." Surbjit's head slumped forward again.

"Surbjit, you were angry and spoke before thinking. You could have told me what you saw. Captain Sharma sees your words as an insult to his family. You too have a family ..."

Surbjit's strength surprised him and stopped him speaking.

"My brother was left to die on the streets, I was used, put in a dangerous place, to get to Mansoor. That was an insult, to be treated in that way... as if I don't count. Tell me, how would you feel, eh?

"It wasn't like ..."

The sight of Surbjit getting to his feet, working through the pain, stopped his words again. He stood, holding the boy's left arm. For a second, he thought that the arm was going to be whipped away, it started to move, then he was truly supporting Surbjit. Carefully, he guided him towards the door.

It was late, but the corridor and the reception area were full again. Some people were in a worse state than Surbjit: one man sitting in his own vomit, didn't move as he was kicked, again and again, by the shouting policeman. This was no place to talk. Surbjit pulled his arm away. Pride. All he could do was walk a pace and glare at anyone who came close.

Outside, his damp shirt clung to his back. Surbjit was so exhausted that getting him across the city would be impossible. The police car pulling up at the station steps was a great sight.

"Kaur!"

The driver slid down his window to look him up and down. Kaur was an insolent young fool who showed no respect despite being new to the station. Too bloody full of himself. Well, he'd show him.

"Kaur, get out of the car. That's an order."

A slow, lazy smile spread across Kaur's sweating face but he didn't move. His words too were slow and unhurried with mocking politeness.

"Sergeant, so sorry, but I've been told by Captain Sharma that ..."

He wrenched the door open and stooped so that he could see and smell the red juice on Kaur's lips. He'd pull the grinning dog out on to the street if he had to. Then he stopped, letting his tension go. There'd been enough violence for one night and some people would love to see two policemen grappling with each other. Turning, he saw Surbjit watching them despite the closed eye and swollen face. He leaned even closer towards Kaur.

"This is Captain Sharma's case. I'm working with him on a murder. I must get this boy to his home straight away. You'll drive me there or Captain Sharma will know of your refusal. Understand?"

Swiftly, he opened the rear passenger door and slid across the back seat. Surbjit was in no state to resist as he pulled him into the car. That made things easier.

"Now, drive. Old town, behind the Thind Hospital."

He saw Kaur's eyes narrow in the mirror before the car eased forward. Sagari would be proud of him and, he had to admit, he felt pretty good about himself. The journey would take about twenty minutes, long enough for Surbjit who fell towards him at the corner. He'd hold him up for a while, talk to him. The parents would be difficult. They'd be worried sick about their son, particularly after Manish ...

"So, Surbjit," he said lightly, "rest for a couple of days. Let your father run the stall and certainly don't do your job for Captain Sharma. He won't mind ..."

"I won't do anything for anyone now, only my family. I don't want to be with you people."

It was easy to understand how Surbjit felt. It had been a great mistake to involve him in the first place and Sharma should be told this. He'd advise him. Before, he could easily have killed him or at least done

him real harm. The recent conversation with Gopal flashed into his mind. Strange how things had changed. Sharma had made him feel good again, shown him respect and treated him more like the policeman he wanted to be. He was better than sneaking into secret meetings to bring down his boss. He wasn't meant for such dealing. But even now he still didn't really know Sharma. That punch ... Surbjit's head slumped against his left arm once more. Not a good sign.

"Surbjit! Surbjit!"

The boy woke with a start and blinked in the light. Just sleeping. That was a relief. Still, stopping off at the hospital would be the right thing to do.

"Kaur, we'll go to the Thind first. It's just a bit further."

The driver took his time answering but the "Yes, sah," was satisfying. He'd expected Surbjit to protest but already his eyelids were drooping again. Concussion? It had been a mistake to leave him in the interrogation room for so long. There could be trouble over that. Keeping the boy awake wouldn't be a problem, he'd chatted to his own sons often enough. Difficult to remember when he'd last played with them though. They were growing so fast.

"Surbjit, we're going to the hospital near your home. Don't worry, you'll be with your family soon. You can use my phone to speak to them. Tell them what's happening. Yes?"

Surbjit mumbled. No chance of him speaking to anyone. The spirit, so clear and strong in the station, seemed to be flowing out of him. Doctor Aziz would know the right treatment although he'd want to know what had happened. He'd worry about that later. For now, keep talking.

"Surbjit, look out of the window. You know where you are now?"

"Archa Street. I show people this place. On my tours ..." That was better.

“You must know Magphur so well, Surbjit. Is there anywhere in this city that you haven’t been?” A picture of Surbjit guiding Ralph Thomas flashed through his mind.

“Those new places, those tall buildings. I want to see more of those. One day, I’ll have enough money to live there.”

“And your family?”

“Family will be with me. And I’ll make many new friends. Friends I can trust. I want a car so that I can take people out of Magphur on longer tours. They’ll pay me big money.”

“Good idea, Surbjit. I’d like a better life for my family too, for my three boys. So we must both work hard for this. Magphur is changing and I don’t think I can ...”

He paused, surprised at his thoughts and words. This plan was new, different. But he couldn’t dismiss it as empty talk. Return to that idea later, plan a conversation with Sagari. Surbjit was coming back, his eyes flicking around looking at everything. They were moving past the line of cars towards the hospital lights. Kaur was good with the horn.

“Go faster, Kaur. I want my working day to end soon.” That would wind the bastard up.

Kaur’s mumbled reply was full of dumb anger as the car jerked forward. No matter, following orders was enough and full respect would come later. Surbjit’s words were even clearer than before.

“You’re worried that I’ll tell the doctor, my family, that Sharma hit me?”

The thought had been there at the back of his mind. Neither he nor Sharma needed a blot on their records nor an official reprimand from Gopal. No, he didn’t need that just when he was starting to feel good about himself again. Suddenly very tired, he turned to Surbjit.

“Say what you have to, Surbjit. Remember, I was a witness. Captain Sharma was angry and acted without thought. I’m sure he’s regretting it. But I won’t lie about what happened. The Captain is a good man. I know that ...” He stopped. Kaur had heard enough.

“I’m no liar either. Sharma’s wife was with Mansoor...at his place. I saw them going into the lift together.”

“Sah? The hospital.”

Just in time, Kaur had come to a halt in front of the hospital doors. Looking at Surbjit he knew that they wouldn’t be long. But it was still a hell of a bruise. Aziz would ask questions.

“Wait here, Kaur.”

Thind Hospital was familiar, he’d walked this corridor many times and he hoped that this time the wait would be short. His police identification would speed things up, maybe, and he looked around for a nurse. The one on the reception desk had too much to deal with. The line of patients - some standing, some sitting, some stretched on the floor – snaked past them. Something needed to happen now. A young nurse approached and he stood tall.

“Ma’am,” he said, holding up his police card in its wallet, “I must see a doctor immediately. It’s most urgent. Is Doctor Aziz available? I’m Sergeant Gupta. He knows me.”

Surbjit slumped against him at that moment. He really was in and out of consciousness. The nurse had seen this too. Glancing down the line of patients, before looking again at Surbjit and then at his uniform, she spoke quickly but kindly.

“Come with me. Doctor Aziz is on a rest period now, but I think he’ll examine this young man.”

He smiled at the nurse and thought of Kaur outside. Let him wait, he’d get him to drive them both home afterwards. The nurse moved to Surbjit’s right side to support him and he took the other arm. Together they

moved towards a door away from the noise in reception. The nurse knocked and disappeared into the room, coming out a few seconds later to smile again.

“Doctor Aziz will see you.”

Doctor Aziz had treated all his children at one time or another and he knew him well. He watched the doctor tilt back Surbjit’s head and look into his eyes.

“No concussion, but there is severe bruising. Who did this?”

He opened his mouth to speak but Surbjit spoke first.

“I got into a fight with someone on the market. He stole something from me and we fought. Gu ... Sergeant Gupta broke it up and brought me here. Thank you, sah.”

The last words were spoken to him. He smiled, surprised. No mention of Sharma’s punch. Trouble avoided, for now.

“Well, young man, I suggest you pick your fights more carefully. The other person was clearly much bigger than you. Here, take this cream and rub it on your face gently. You must rest for two days. Someone else can do your work. Have a holiday, eh! Now go, both of you. You’ve already taken enough of my break.”

He returned Aziz’s smile and felt guilty.

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They were sitting in the back of the car again. The hospital call hadn’t gone as he’d expected. Surbjit’s house came into view.

“Just at the end of this street, Kaur. Stop here. You’re a good boy, Surbjit. Not many people like you would ...”

“People like me?” Surbjit’s fight was returning. “Street rubbish, eh?”

“No, Surbjit. I didn’t mean ...”

“Tell ... er... Captain Sharma that I will meet with him and tell him again all that I saw in Mansoor’s place. About his wife meeting with Mansoor. Everything. I’ll tell it as it should be told. Just facts, no shouting. Then I’ll go to my family and lead my own life. This part is over.”

Kaur was looking straight ahead, listening. Damn it! One problem avoided, another one invited. Kaur would talk to others about what he’d heard. Gossip would spread about Sharma and his wife.

He felt Surbjit leave the car and saw him run unsteadily across the short distance to his house. He’d tell his parents everything. There could still be trouble for Sharma with charges of police brutality. Kaur turned to him.

“Where to now, Segeant Gupta?”

Chapter 35. Surbjit.

He ran as best he could towards his front door. It was late but he had no idea of the time. Neighbours stood under lights watching. Surbjit has come home in a police car! That family is trouble. He could imagine what they'd be saying to each other and was glad that the door was open so that he could escape their eyes. The wooden chair was empty. He'd wanted his father to be there, smoking and waiting to talk. It was later than he thought.

They rushed to meet him: father, mother grandmother. He'd expected the wailing, the questions, the hands delicately touching his damaged face and he tried to wave all this away. The noise of their voices filled his ears and made his head throb; it was like being hit again. Were they relieved or angry? He needed space, rest. He tried to say this but he couldn't hear his own words, so he kept quiet and let himself be led to the chair. He'd choose what to tell them later when his thoughts were clear. Yes, he'd expected this scene. What he hadn't expected to see, when they moved away, was Sharma sitting in the corner of the room watching everything.

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All was quiet and everyone was seated when Sharma spoke.

“Surbjit, I've come to say that I was wrong to hit you. I'm so sorry. My anger is no excuse. Please ... forgive me ...”

The words cost Sharma some pride, he could see, and they had been chosen carefully. His parents, dadiji, were sitting quietly with their heads bowed. Sharma must have been speaking to them too, explaining and preparing for this moment. Oh, this was exhausting. He just wanted to go to his mattress to let the older people sort things out. Working at his jobs would be enough for him tomorrow, the next day and all the days after that. Sharma spoke again.

“Surbjit, you must tell me everything you saw in Mansoor's place. Again. Everything. I won't be angry this time, I promise. Tell me once and then I'll leave you in peace.”

Looking around for help, he saw his father nod to him, once. He sighed and started to speak calmly and quietly as he had promised Sergeant Gupta that he would. Sharma and Gupta could have planned this moment. No. As he spoke he saw Sharma's tired face, the sad eyes, and he knew that this was no police trick. Sharma's suffering face showed he was looking for peace. The others walked out of the room to leave the two of them alone. Maybe Sharma had asked for this. His father hesitated, face hard, before limping behind the women into the next room. He left nothing out – the expressions on the faces of Mansoor and Sharma's wife – everything was said without questions from Sharma.

When he'd finished, he tried to push himself up from the armchair. It was done and he wanted his bed. Sharma stopped him.

“What was Mansoor like?”

“I've told you. Anyway, you know him!” He was impatient now, anxious to end this.

“Yes, he was my friend once. But now things are different. What did you think of him?”

“He treated me well. Said he would pay me for work another time. Made me think I could go to him and talk, see a different side of things. It was ... exciting ...”

“Surbjit, the man is a killer. I shouldn't have put you near him. I've found out things about him which affect every part of this city. Mansoor must be stopped. I'll stop him. This is even more important to me than it was. You've helped me with this work. Your job is finished. This is payment for that ... not for what I did.”

The money was in front of him. Sharma was paying him off and this part of his life was ending. He heard his father's feet shuffling across the floor in the next room before reaching to take the notes. Sharma stood up and began to walk towards the door. Suddenly there was one more thing to know.

“Captain Sharma, do you believe that Manish met Mansoor?”

“He may have done. I don’t know. But I know that he worked for Mansoor and was paid by him. I can tell you that. I must go. Stay with your family, Surbjit. Work hard and stay away from bad company. You’ve seen what that’s like. You rest and I’ll go home.”

Then Sharma was gone leaving him clutching the rupees as sleep came. After a while he became aware of hands lifting him. Before his eyes closed he noticed that Manish’s mattress had been taken away.

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The late morning sun woke him. The noises in the street gradually made sense and the cooking smells began to lift his spirits. This was home. The side of his face ached when he touched his cheek and wiggled his jaw. He stood slowly to steady himself against the wall and his head began to throb again.

“Surbjit! Lie down. Rest!”

Mother’s voice commanded yet offered comfort and made him want to stretch out on the floor again to be looked after. He couldn’t see his father. His expression must have shown these words because the answer came.

“Father has gone to the stall to work. He’s happier now. You must stay here and get well. Come, eat.”

With her hand on his elbow, Mother guided him towards the roti. He needed this food. He ate painfully, looking up once to smile at Mother and dadiji standing there watching him. As the second roti was brought he heard their angry words about “that man Sharma.” They’d accepted the money but it hadn’t calmed them. Sharma must have used his smoothest words last night to make them allow him to stay in the house. He remembered the look which Father had given Sharma. No point in thinking about something that was over. He pushed the last piece of bread into his throbbing teeth. Life was better and his strength was returning.

“My head’s stopped hurting. I’ll go and help with the stall.”

His words started howls and protests again. Their hands pulled at his sleeves, trying to make him stay, but he still had strength and managed – not too fast – to jog out of the front door to the corner of the alleyway. Then he slowed down and breathed deeply. Today was a beginning. No more past.

At the stall it was difficult to say what Father was thinking as they looked at each other. But as they stood together, selling, he was pleased to feel his hair ruffled. There'd been no questions, no protests, just a few quick words before the work began. Time passed without talk and it pleased him that business was fast. One customer took his attention away.

“Hey, Surbjit.”

Sashi looked ill, unsteady on his feet. He knew the reason for this.

“Sashi, good to see you. Not driving today?”

“No, bus is off the road at the moment. But don't worry. I'm doing okay.” He patted his pocket. Full of money or full of ganja? “Anyway, you look like you've been in an accident. What happened?”

“Er, just fell moving stuff for the stall...” He looked at Sash, long and hard, somehow knowing that he should say no more. Sash had changed. The dope had mashed his brains and sometimes he looked like a snake. He wouldn't trust him yet.

“Yeah, saw you coming home in the police car the other night... Trouble?”

He stayed silent before turning to a customer.

“Got to go now, Surbjit. Business.”

He was glad when Sashi had gone.

*

Three days of selling and handling money passed before he saw her. It was morning, two hours in. Sharma's wife was there, two girls behind her, moving through the market. He recognised her straight away. She was wearing green this time and a pale blue shawl covered her head. There was no smile but when she looked at the girls her face was kind. She kept her eyes on them even when she was looking at the vegetables on the corner stall.

“Surbjit.”

His father's voice, although gentle, made him jump and returned him to the task of lifting a box full of packets of bangles. He was ready to sell as she moved towards him. Then she was near, looking down at the bangles and bracelets – the packets of twelve always sold well.

“Ma'am, these are our finest bangles, the best on the market. Shall I unwrap some for you?”

Their eyes met. Nothing. Of course, she hadn't noticed him before – all her attention had been on Mansoor or Sharma. She nodded with a smile which didn't reach her eyes and he began to unwrap.

“Ma'am, I can do you a special deal, the whole packet for only ...”

Her phone turned her away. She listened then spoke fast. Her voice wasn't kind; she was giving instructions like a businesswoman. He listened for names but there were none. Putting the phone in her bag, she hurried away without stopping to look at anything else.

The afternoon work was slow. Mansoor, Sharma and his wife, Gupta's words of loyalty about his boss, all this troubled him. As he helped pack up he looked at the bag of money. This was the time when Manish used to come.

Chapter 36. Gopal.

Studying the calendar on his office wall, he smiled. Three weeks to go before he could walk out of here to start his life as a retired dignitary of Magphur. Much of his desk had been cleared. He'd enjoyed the last few days because things had gone according to plan. It had been a real worry when he had seen Gupta's jottings that night in the police station. Too close to the truth for comfort. So was Sharma. Mansoor scared the hell out of him but he was glad to have him on his side. Gupta could be bought off with promotion or the promise of a quiet retirement, no problem. Sharma was different. Exhausted, driven mad by policing Magphur, but still dangerous – like the quietly basking sharks Jaswinder had told him about from her sailing days. The bloody man had dug too deep and knew too much. It was difficult to understand why he hadn't made more use of his knowledge. Mind you, it was hard to prove the truth of events which were buried so deeply in the past. Anyway, Sharma was about to go and he'd be there to watch his downfall whilst expressing his regret at a promising career gone bad. His statement for the press would be full of suppressed emotion, even more so than his retirement speech which would be heard soon after Sharma had been disgraced.

Mansoor was a clever devil, especially when it came to contacts and knowing the workings of Magphur. He'd built up a case against Sharma – bit by bit, level by level – so that the great hero would soon be buried, discredited, his words worthless.

He went over the details of what he called "Sharma's Shame": using a suspected murderer as a paid informer, putting a young boy in a position of danger, police brutality. That was a useful, last minute addition. Mansoor's informers were good! It wouldn't be so bad for Sharma if any of these most dubious methods had brought results in the Thomas case, but they hadn't. Many men had paid murderers for information, but in these changing times you shouldn't get caught. He'd speak in the strongest terms, after Sharma's departure, about how Ralph Thomas's killer was still at large and he would add that corruption had no place in the new Magphur. That would be a nice touch. Mansoor was happy too! The smug, evil bastard had hinted that he was holding something back, one final thing that would twist the knife in

Sharma's guts. Well, it was good to see a man so content in his job. And Mansoor only wanted one thing in return ... respectability. A clear mention, or what the politicians called "a ringing endorsement," for the support which he'd given to the new Magphur, its police force and businesses. That support had amounted to hard cash in return for favours, a blind eye turned to Mansoor's methods of persuading people to agree with his so-called business aims. This wasn't the time to dwell on all that. No matter how sharply Mansoor dressed he was still a gutter boy and soon he'd be able to do what the hell he wanted.

He pushed more papers into the shredder beside his chair. Gradually clearing away the past had not been as painful as expected and somehow he felt cleaner. Nearly done now. Soon he would travel with Jas to see the places that she'd seen when she was young and all would be peaceful between them as she showed him new scenes. It was never too late for a fresh start.

Dealing with Sharma would be most interesting. He felt let down by the man and he was looking forward to seeing his face as he read out the allegations from his file. Let him try and argue his way out of all that. There was no room for sympathy. A quick result was all it would have taken to save his career, at least for a while longer. Mansoor had told him to wait a while before formally approaching Sharma. For some reason, there was need for good timing but this waiting was driving him mad. He felt impatient for a final flourish to show that his standards remained high at the end of his career. The only thing to do was to carry on destroying his past.

*

The phone call came as he was slumbering in his chair after his evening meal. The other phone. He had slipped it into his breast pocket just after Jas had left the room.

"Hello?"

"Ravi, my friend. You're alone?" Mansoor's tone was expressionless and he sensed that the end was coming.

“Yes.” He turned to glance behind him. Nothing.

“Good. I’m setting up the meeting that we need. I’ll send a car for you tomorrow at three. My apartment. My man will know where to go. There will be no change of time. Understand? Three o’clock. Sharma will be here.”

“No! Look, when I meet with Sharma it must be in my office so that I ...”

“You’re in no position to bargain with me, Ravi. I know about you. Don’t make me use that knowledge. Don’t worry. You’ll get what you want. You can have two of your men follow you tomorrow. Ready to make an arrest.”

The line had gone dead. So, the final act of his working life was coming. This wasn’t what he wanted! He’d planned everything so precisely - his career, his appearance, his words – and now, quite suddenly, he was to be taken to a place to meet two men who could destroy him and everything he’d worked for. This scared him. He needed to be in a place where he could think. He could be alone in his office. He turned to leave and faced Jas’s eyes. Still beautiful, but without tenderness. That had gone.

“You seem restless, my love. Going somewhere?” There was no emotion he could recognise and her gaze didn’t leave his face.

“Er, yes. Something I must fetch from the office. Important papers.”

“But you haven’t brought work home for years. What could be so important in these last few weeks? Anyway, aren’t we supposed to be planning a holiday? A new life together? That’s what you said.” The mockery, just beneath the surface, wasn’t pleasant.

“I won’t be long, Jas. Then we’ll carry on talking. We’ll do whatever you want.”

He started to move past her, but again her voice stopped him. Colder still.

“I want you to tell me what’s going on. I can read you. Something’s wrong. You think I’m a fool? I’ve been watching you. You’ve always needed my help.”

The last words cut him. This was the wrong moment when he had to be alone and his head was pounding. Calm, he needed calm. Turning to face her, he used the look which had charmed her before. But her face wasn’t going to change.

“There’s no problem. Just some loose ends to tie up. I don’t want to be thinking about such things next week. There’ll be parties to go to, people to see. Why don’t you buy yourself some new clothes tomorrow? Shop on line. You always enjoy that. Put all the other wives in the shade ...”

“Ravi, if there’s going to be trouble I want to know. You think you’re the only one with a reputation to protect? We’ve worked hard to get here: this house, the way we live. We need to get our story straight or ...”

“I tell you there’s nothing!” His voice was suddenly sharp, angry, pained by the coldness in her tone. They were strangers, each wanting to save themselves. This was the rest of their lives. He moved to go and she stepped towards him. Her perfume was everywhere.

“You stink of failure. You’d be nothing without me.”

And she was gone.

*

The journey to the office dragged. He hadn’t bothered with a driver but his own space brought no relief. Many times, when his mind had been full, he’d sat on the back seat thinking, planning his way through problems. This feeling of powerlessness was new. People on the force would say that he never took chances, always covered his tracks, always had a back up plan. He could handle Magphur! Always someone else to blame, take the rap so that his good work could continue. Now danger was tightening around him like a

noose. He couldn't think about facing Mansoor and Sharma tomorrow. Facing Jas had been difficult enough. There had to be control. He didn't deserve this, particularly when he'd always wanted the best for Magphur.

Mansoor. That man's words had spread into his brain like a disease. At first he had sat in the background at all those meetings, those sharp suited get togethers to "establish a common interest" in the new Magphur. Major figures, businessmen, people on the fringe of business and those who weren't to be examined or questioned too closely. All together for the greater good. Mansoor had been charming, had sent Jaswinder gifts before proposing projects, had often been in deep conversation with her. Profit and benefit for everyone, rich and poor. He could recite the mission statement now. The money passed to him quietly had been just reward for his concern for the people. Jas hadn't complained then. How could he have known that Mansoor had been concerned not just with the present and the future but with the past, his past? Often he had replayed questions, conversations, in his brain. Those pleasantries now seemed like interrogations. Mansoor's conversations with Jas felt like betrayal. What had they spoken about? The sound of the horn shattered his brain like a blow. Hell! Still in uniform. Keep calm, eyes straight ahead, look good at all times.

*

His office was in darkness. He needed a place to become strong again. The light flicked on ...

Someone had searched here recently. His swivel chair had been moved back against the wall to give easy access to his desk drawers. The shredder stood in the middle of the rug, its lid tilted. Probably empty. The few papers on the desk were still there, but the paperweight – the model of Big Ben which Jas had brought back and which he dutifully used – stood alone, not where he'd left it. Strange. He'd check the safe in a minute. Moving the chair back to the desk, he sat. Then his heart began to race. Closing his stinging eyes, he made himself think, go through all the possibilities. A detailed examination first, an inventory of any things that were missing and then a prepared story. He would be indignant, affronted, appalled that someone could do such a thing to him. To have his office turned over this way! What the hell had happened to security? He was Ravi Gopal, Police Commissioner, winner of many awards after years of unblemished service. Again,

he saw Jas's face, her eyes, heard her words. Worry about home later. Breathing deeply, a quick look in his right hand drawer told him it was missing – the news clippings folder, the record of him as a hero, the picture of The Magphur Star. Had he taken it home? He knew damned well he hadn't.

He went to the wall safe to press the numbers with his shaking hands. Good, his revolver was still there. He'd need that tomorrow.

Chapter 37. **Rhiannon.**

The hotel room was her space. She'd lost track of time ages ago although the arrival of her meals had given her some sense of shape. The food was great, especially the paneer. So different to the takeaways and tandoori stuff she used to have at home and much better than the warmed-up food she'd eaten with her parents in front of the telly when nobody spoke. Rajid had taught her how to prepare meals and they'd cooked together. He'd shown her the different sauces and she remembered how close she'd been to him – not much choice in that kitchen – watching him stir in the spices and the stock. She smiled, thinking about his look of mock horror when she poured in all the turmeric. He'd gasped and stuck out his tongue so that she'd cracked up laughing. Good times. Twisting her body on the bed, she looked up at the ceiling. They'd been happy before he showed his other side. She cried out for those lost moments.

“Raj, Raj ...!”

The quiet double knock on the door stilled her.

‘Come in.’ Her voice croaked with tears. She sat up and cleared her throat.

The waiter, the same bloke as yesterday, bowed as he pushed open the door. Room service, sorted by the police. The man again put her covered tray on the low table at the foot of the bed. He'd hang around waiting for a tip and she reached into her blouse pocket for the couple of notes she kept handy. That should keep him happy. As he walked through the open door she saw that gloomy policewoman with the flabby face watching everything. Bet she'd stuck her finger in the food to taste it. The door closed quietly.

Fucking hell! What was this all about? She thrust herself off the bed and stood, fists clenched, eyes fixed on the door. She was only helping with enquiries. The police guard was for her own protection, she'd been told. Protection from what? The only thing she needed protecting from was answering the same bloody questions over and over again. She'd told the police everything! Still that Sharma rumbled on and on. The streets would be strange, dangerous, he'd said. Of course she could go out ... but not alone. The killers could be amongst the crowds – he'd looked her straight in the eyes as he spoke – and she might know things

about them they didn't want known, things that her husband had told her. She laughed bitterly. Raj hadn't told her anything! He'd been too scared most of the time. This was doing her head in. Raj gone and she was more of a fucking prisoner than ever. He'd been a bastard and near the end she'd spent days being scared. Okay, there'd been some laughs back home and he'd helped her a lot just after they met but life with him had closed in on her. She should've dumped him after he'd got her away from home. Their little apartment, two small rooms, had been a place away from Dad, a place where she'd been able to talk and smile. No-one had stood up to the old man like Raj. Back in London or, better still, somewhere else, somewhere away from those assholes he called mates, things might've been different... No, no chance. Raj, Dad, Dad, Raj. Men were all the bloody same. About time she looked after herself.

The food's aroma came to her and she returned to the edge of the bed to relax and eat. Her waistband squeezed her. Not cool. She'd put on the pounds since being stuck here. Raj would have had a fit. "Comfort eating" her mum would call it with that biting voice which could make her cry. Sharma had told her that the body could soon be released. God knows what would happen then. She began to eat quickly.

Later, putting down her fork on the empty plate, she walked to the window to see the city lights. The movement, the dancing colours, held her gaze, excited her for a while, until she tore herself away to walk around the room restlessly. She saw her phone lying on the bed. Sharma had asked if he could help her get in touch with her family, Raj's family, back home, but she'd just turned away. Reaching for the phone, she formed words in her head. She tried to recall their faces – her parents, Raj's side. So long since she'd seen them. Nah, forget it, they all hated her anyway. They'd just bark questions at her like they had when she and Raj had got together. Let them find out the details of all this another way. None of this was her fault. She'd get Sharma to phone home. No thinking about any funeral. Not yet.

*

She looked at the bedside clock. One thirty in the morning. She'd been sitting there fully dressed for ages. The only person she'd seen was that waiter again when he'd come to collect the plates. Again she'd given

him a couple of notes. She'd have to start thinking about saving her money. Opening the door, he'd given her a glimpse of the policeman sitting there, head nodding. The woman had gone. She heard snores in the corridor. Not surprising that the guard was sleeping on the job. Must be boring as hell stuck there all night. Her mind was alive. This was her chance. To hell with a police escort, she wanted freedom.

She stood up, slipped into her shoes and crept towards the door. It was good to be moving and thinking of what to do next. She opened the door an inch. The policeman was sitting under the dim wall light, chin on his chest, snoring like a pig. He'd get a right bollocking. Tough! It had happened before when he'd nodded off and she'd heard Sharma go for him. The time glowed on her phone showing over an hour before someone else came to take over. She had no plan, it was just good to be doing something. She'd be back before any changing of the guard. Would reception be empty or full of people, even at this time? Come on, Rhi, you're a guest, not a prisoner, no-one's going to worry about you, especially if you slip them some money like Raj would have done. She stuffed the notes in her pocket, stepped into the corridor and, breathing quietly, moved towards the double doors at the end. Christ, that man could snore! Stairs or lift? Less chance of meeting someone on the stairs.

Her heart thumped as she pushed through to the steps. Cool air breezed up the two flights which lead to reception. Voices sounded down below. She remembered when she had followed Raj up the stairs after that night in the restaurant. He'd been swearing because the lift had been full – one of his hyper moods – shouting whilst she thought of ways to escape the nastiness. She moved down, sweating hand brushing the banister, every second expecting to hear running footsteps in the corridor, the sound of the doors behind her and the hand on her shoulder. She could always give the speech about her rights, about the fact that she wasn't a prisoner but still a tourist. It was police harassment. The round window showed her the main desk, people.

Looking straight ahead, trying not to move too fast, she walked past the desk and towards the glass entrance. The lights shone and moved on the street outside. The lobby clerk looked up once. A waiter, not her waiter, was carrying a tray towards the lift. His bow was polite. Two guests, business suited, sat in the

corner by the small tree, leaning towards each other, talking without looking up. The attendant, a red and blue feather in his turban, smiled and opened the door for her. Easy so far. She stared ahead, moving out of the cool lobby to where the night heat stung her eyes and nose.

She turned towards the reds, blues and greens which broke the darkness like a celebration. This city was alive with light! Eyes watched her and instinctively she pulled her scarf over her loose hair. She was wearing the pale blue robe which Raj had bought her; suitable for round the house back home he'd told her. Hopefully, it didn't stand out too much, and she swore quietly at herself for not thinking more about her appearance. Darker clothes would've been better maybe. Still, she was out of that room for a while. Head down, she paced away from the hotel, ready to look up later when she'd put some distance between her and her guards. Her sense of direction was always good in London – she'd find her way back okay.

*

She was sitting on the jagged pile of rubble, the only place she could find, head still covered, looking around her. Even in these early hours there were cars and carts and people still worked. It was bright as daylight here and nothing was still. Raj had often told her about this part of the city. Looks like a building site now, he'd said, but Magphur would soon be the place to be. Sheets and tarpaulins had been rigged up between scaffolding and people slept here surrounded by goods ready to be sold. Some haggled with customers already as though there was no time to waste. Half-formed, new buildings were in use. People moved across the lit windows. No-one could wait, the space was needed now. She yawned at her phone. Ten to three. Thinking of the journey, getting her bearings, she pushed herself up for the walk back. Getting here had been in a straight line, nothing fancy for starters. Ahead was her bed and finding a way of getting into her room unnoticed. If anyone caught her they could wave their arms and shout all they wanted. She was ready for them.

A ragged figure with a clawed hand pushed towards her as she hurried on. The beer shop, now closed, had been one of her landmarks. Raj would never drink in a place like that. That night in The Palitana, with

its polished glasses and white tablecloths, seemed so long ago. Raj had left her for those two hours and when he returned everything had changed forever.

She stepped carefully over the broken, cracked road which led past a row of crooked huts. People were living in the dust near the new buildings. She'd never get used to that - posh offices one minute, muck the next. Raj had always said that they should keep away from the river. Well, she would tonight. The temple, passed earlier, its doorway still glowing with yellow and purple lights, towered over her. Its brightness invited her in but there was no time now. Her damp robe pressed her back and she looked forward to her grumbling shower which trickled water. The traffic was building up, hooting and weaving, as people picked their way across wide roads. It was great losing yourself in a crowd. She pulled her shawl further over her head to hide her hair.

Then she heard the screech of brakes, a scream. Standing still, she felt people jostling, pushing. Some stopped to look. Then she saw. A young man lay beneath the wheels of a long, expensive looking car – Raj would have stopped to admire the bodywork. He was moving, writhing, as blood flowed from a head wound and soaked the ground. Just like Raj lying there ... The driver, getting out of the car, was calmly buttoning up the jacket of his black suit but the passenger remained in his seat, head down, yawning over his spread newspaper. Not his problem. As two policemen approached, one of them waving the crowd away with his stick, the driver faced them his hands spread wide. The policemen worked hard against the crowd but trouble was coming. As two more policemen arrived, she saw the driver reach inside his jacket. Money to calm things down? Still the man in the car didn't look. She felt like banging on the car windows to force him to look up. Bastard! She turned away.

*

The hotel lobby was still full of people and she was able to make her way unnoticed just like before. No problem on the empty stairs. Pausing on the final landing, she took a deep breath before pushing the door into the corridor.

The cop was there, the one who'd fallen asleep on the job. His face was still annoying. His relief showed when he saw her.

"Ma'am, where have you been?" His voice was high-pitched, angry as he walked quickly towards her.

To hell with being told off. The bloody idiot shouldn't have dozed.

"Look, I've been stuck in this hotel for days, haven't I? I needed to get out, stretch my legs. I've got a right to ..."

"Ma'am, one of us could have shown you around this area. We are your protection." Jeez, the bloke looked well scared.

"Oh yeah! Some protection! What with you snoring your head off and that other one mucking around with my food, I feel really safe. Now I'm tired, I need to get to bed. Sleep well."

She hadn't thought to lock her room earlier, too hyped up. Going for a walk, seeing all the action, and throwing those words at her guard was enough action for one night. Falling on to the bed, face down, she thought about her next move. This was new. No Raj to fill her brain, making her laugh one minute and totally freaking her out the next. Thinking of the good times was the way forward. She rolled on her back to sleep. The air-conditioning throbbed through her head as she drifted away.

"That was a very foolish move, Mrs Patel."

The voice pulled her back. How long ...? Sharma. She knew straight away. Bloody police everywhere. Okay, she'd have a go at Sharma if that's what it took.

"Oh, give me a break will you! I just needed a change. No more questions, right. I can't tell you nothing else. Anyway ..."

She pushed herself up to see the city lights moving across his uniform as he stood by the window. He'd been in the room watching her every move and he looked right into her now. Words stuck in her throat.

“Mrs Patel, I’ve told you that we are looking after you. The people who murdered your husband would not hesitate to kidnap or kill you. One of my people must be close to you at all times.”

“Okay ... okay. I get it. Now leave me alone. I’m tired. Just tell me when I can go home. Yeah?”

“I think it will be soon, Mrs Patel. I can help you with your husband’s arrangements.” He moved to sit in the armchair near the door. “Forgive me, but I must ask you some questions again about the night in the restaurant. It won’t take long. Tomorrow won’t do.”

“I told you, no!” She knelt up, furious. “There’s nothing else. Raj went off for two hours on that night. That’s it! There were lots of people sat there, all around the same table. You’re the detective, ask them.” Her anger surged higher. “Maybe then you’d catch Raj’s killers, somewhere out there, instead of doing my head in droning on about two missing hours.”

“Oh, we’ve questioned The Palitana staff and other customers. I know who was there. All too scared to give us firm information. You are the only one whose word I would trust.”

“Why?” His last words had surprised her, dampened her anger.

“Because you’re not afraid. Once you clear your mind again, you’ll tell me more about that night.”

He was going nowhere, he was waiting. Well, she could be stubborn too. Difficult to fight against the sleep though. Finally, sinking on to one elbow, she broke the silence.

“Okay,” she sighed. “Ask your questions quickly and then let me get to bed. Your shit-heap city has worn me out.”

She saw his grim smile leave him before he spoke. “You’ve told me that your husband left you for two hours in The Palitana. How did he get the message to go?”

How the hell was she supposed to remember that? Had he asked her that when she was at the police station? She couldn’t remember. The Palitana, their table full of people, waiters running to give them the

best service, other guests looking on. She'd been surrounded by crooks, she knew that now, probably knew it then, but kept her head down for Raj. The scene moved and reshaped in her mind. That man, with the breath that stank, head leaned towards her jabbering on about God knows what. Raj had told him where to get off before - yes, that's right – just before he'd taken a call. His hand had gone to his ear, she'd tried to speak to him, but he'd lifted his finger to silence her. Just like he'd done on their last night together, before that walk outside ... Then he'd gone and the man had leaned towards her again, smiling disgustingly when she tried to use the few words that Raj had taught her.

“He had a phone call. Then he left with a mate. I saw him again two hours later ... seemed longer at the time.”

“Thank you. Could you tell who the call was from? Were any names mentioned? Take your time Mrs Patel. This could be the most important thing you tell me.”

So many words, so many names on that night. Some words she'd heard again and again. What were they and which ones sounded like names? Only an answer would get rid of the policeman and maybe end all this. She wanted to be away from the look in Sharma's eyes. Say something, anything.

“Two of your guys were busy tonight. Someone got run over right by all the new buildings. Big crowd came to watch. Guy who was being driven didn't even get off the back seat. Let his chauffeur sort it out. Smart looking car ...”

She was pleased to see the look of surprise on his face. The new buildings were a long way from the hotel. She'd done well to get so far.

“Yes, there are more and more people like that in Magphur who can buy life and death by opening their wallets. Someone like that had your husband killed. I need your answer to find that person.”

God, her mind was muddled and mixed like those lights. The accident scene. The guy in the car, reading whilst blood spread on the pavement. More and more people like that? She thought of the guy twisting and

turning beneath the wheels. Then she saw Raj lying in front of her, bleeding, money flying around the reaching hands. Whatever else, Raj didn't deserve to be snuffed out by anyone who could buy their way out of murder. People who can buy life and death! She closed her eyes, reliving that night in the restaurant. Rajid was always on about some bloke, some kind of bent operator who he'd admired. What was his name? The word spoken so often by so many people around that table. She'd been thinking of it as she stood in front of the cloakroom mirror that night, dabbing her face, spraying perfume. Speech rhythms ran through her head. Raj had spoken snatches of Hindi sometimes, not always so fast as on that night. The word had still been there though. Yes, definitely a name ... Mansoor.

"Mansoor. That's the name I remember. It came up a lot. I don't know, but it sounded like the call was from him."

She waited for the next question but none came. Sharma nodded before standing up.

"If you need to go out again, please be escorted by at least one of the officers. Chandhra, the young lady officer, is very good with shopping."

And that was it. He left the room closing the door quietly behind him.

Chapter 38. Rehman.

He stood in the middle of the thickly carpeted room, bathed in morning light, and looked around. Mansoor certainly knew how to live. This was a place for business as well as for pleasure. On his left the orderly desk looked out over the hazy Magphur morning. Just behind this there was a large oval table which could be used for either dining or meeting. He knew that the safe was behind that tasteless daubing of a river winding beside a featureless pink and blue temple. The opposite end of the apartment was the place to relax. Here the carpets, divans and chairs – matched in shades of orange and dark red – all glowed. He'd seen this overblown luxury many times, was more than a little jealous of the richness of the design, and often told himself that, if he owned the apartment, he'd give it more class.

But this was him not wishing to think of the main business to come. It would be painful. When Mansoor reached the endgame of a project it always was. The table was set for a meeting. Four places. Mansoor would be at one end, chairing, whilst he would be at the other end, making notes. Notes which would be scrutinised most carefully. Again he'd been instructed to write on the paper provided as the clicking of a laptop always disturbed Mansoor. Just one of the pet hates which could so easily drive him into a white hot rage. He'd been on the receiving end of these and only his usefulness had protected him. Yes, he hated these situations when a meeting could change everything. He laid his best fountain pen beside the paper and checked there was a spare pen in his pocket so that nothing was left to chance.

The door to the adjoining bedroom swung open, there was a brief snatch of Manisha's voice, and Mansoor was standing there. The well cut, dark blue suit and tie were immaculate, the black hair again slick and oiled. He always thought of a bloated lizard, basking in the sun but ready to move suddenly. Mansoor turned towards him as though noticing him for the first time. The smile was ready, pleasant, but there was no opening welcome. Business had begun.

“I see everything is ready. Good. Got your thoughts in order?”

“Yes, as usual.” It was always best to sound tough and confident with Mansoor even though he could feel his heart beating. He took deep breaths as he turned away.

“They should be here soon.” Mansoor’s voice was brisk as he took his seat. “There will be ten minutes between arrivals. I’ve told the people on the door to let them up without any fuss. Although, my friend, I want you to search them before they take their places. I don’t expect any trouble. But if there is ...”

He looked at the table and saw the black shape of the revolver on the blotting pad in front of Mansoor. Sweat broke out on his forehead. This whole thing was on a knife edge and just one wrong word would bring disaster today. Mansoor put the gun in the table drawer, level with his stomach where it would be easy to reach. He imagined it being slid out quietly as someone was speaking.

“Rehman, don’t look so worried.” The voice was amused, the eyes hard. “There won’t be any trouble. You may even enjoy the little surprise I’ve got in store for our guests.”

He swallowed. “But... you said that you would keep to the plan. I’ve prepared everything, just as you said. All the evidence ...”

“I know, my friend, I know.” Mansoor smiled, leaning back in his chair. But don’t worry. None of your work will be wasted. I just want to see Sharma’s face when ...”

The lift’s bell interrupted. This was the time. Sharma stepped forward as the doors swept back then closed behind him. For a few seconds, as Mansoor and Sharma stared at each other, the only sound was the lift descending. Then Mansoor’s voice boomed.

“Welcome, Sanjay. Exactly on time. It wasn’t always so, eh.” His short burst of laughter was even louder than his words. “Now, forgive me, but I must take precautions. I’m sure you understand. Rehman.”

He walked towards Sharma who, expecting a search, spread his arms wide in preparation, all the while staring at Mansoor. Frisking a police officer made him squirm inside. He was a lawyer not some kind of heavy. Yet he’d done this many times in this room, always aware that Mansoor was watching him as though

enjoying the degradation. He turned to face Mansoor's smirk. An educated man, treated like a servant! He smiled back.

"Thank you, Rehman. Now both of you, please, come and sit down. Do help yourselves to water whilst we wait. The day's going to be hot, I think."

The water remained untouched. Sharma's back was to the wall, facing the lift doors, expressionless. He heard Manisha moving about in the room behind Sharma, the bedroom. Then, instinctively, he began scribbling on his paper as Sharma's voice broke the silence. He steadied the shaking.

"What time do you expect Commissioner Gopal?" Sharma's voice was poised and confident. This would be interesting.

His fingers were sweating and he paused to wipe his right palm on his trouser leg as Mansoor watched. Well, he'd watch everything too and forget nothing. It was like performing, pretending, in court. Mansoor made a show of looking at his watch.

"Oh, in about ten minutes. Time for us to become reacquainted, Sanjay. It's been a long time and much has changed. As you see, I'm now well thought of in Magphur. Oh, how rude of me. Sanjay, let me introduce my good friend Rehman. A lawyer. Very smart. He'll see that we do everything correctly and that nothing ..."

He saw the slightest of nods from Sharma before his words mocked.

"You must indeed be a very powerful man, Mansoor, if you can summon the Commissioner of Police to your apartment and chair matters like this. You even have a tame lawyer... Tell me, who's being examined here today? Commissioner Gopal, you or me?"

The reply came quickly and it was one which he knew Mansoor would enjoy.

“First of all, Sanjay, you should know that the power in Magphur is changing. It lies in these places now.” He spread his arms wide to indicate his apartment. “Anyway, Commissioner Gopal and I stand together. You have some serious explaining to do, my friend, and your explanations must satisfy us or you’ll be in even deeper trouble.”

Sharma’s laugh was loud and harsh.

“So, not only do you have a house trained lawyer, you have a pet Police Commissioner as well. It seems I can’t win. Tell me, how much are you paying these people?”

“The odds are against you, Sanjay. I’ll spare you the details now, Commissioner Gopal will speak more fully soon. But there are the small matters of bribing a known criminal who you should have been arresting. Also, placing a member of the public in danger, someone you are sworn to protect. Oh, and assaulting a young boy who was simply helping you with your enquiries into a murder ... a well publicised murder which you have failed to solve. It grieves me that visitors to our new city are still in danger because of your incompetence.”

He wrote this down, his lawyer’s mind working, assessing Mansoor’s words. Too fast, you bastard, too fast. Not time for the kill yet. You’d do better, playing the power broker, waiting for Gopal, before throwing half formed accusations at a high ranking police officer. Sharma was angry now, he could see. Angry, but in control. Dangerous. Mansoor could be the first to crack and that could be hell. This conversation wasn’t part of the plan. He sat back. Say something to get them back on track. He thought of the gun in the drawer. If Mansoor lost his cool ...

“Gentlemen, if I might suggest ...”

The ring tone sounded so suddenly that none of them knew its source at first. A dancing rhythm. Then Mansoor was pulling out his phone. He’d be enjoying showing how busy he was.

“Pardon me, gentleman. Business never waits. Hello?”

He hated the way people like Mansoor used their phones as a symbol of importance. Always, he turned away when he saw this. Yet now Mansoor's face held his attention. It was taut, expressionless, as he sat up straight with only the eyes moving from side to side. There was the confusion of a witness cornered by cross examination. The call ended. Silently, he slid the phone away and cleared his throat before attempting a smile. A good performance.

"Gentlemen, it seems that we will not have the benefit of Commissioner Gopal's words. He's been unavoidably detained at his office." He was thinking, thinking. What next? "Rehman, I must now ask you to outline the complaints against Sh ... Captain Sharma which you have in your file. Commissioner Gopal, of course, has copies of all documents and ..."

He stared hard at Mansoor, his writing hand still. What a fool! What an idiot! Without Gopal, this meeting had no link with official procedure. Adjourn! He looked across at Sharma who started to speak.

"Mansoor, it's no good. You can't build such a case against me. Not like this. Now listen. In a few minutes my men will enter this room. You too must answer questions relating to ..."

The bell chimed again. He saw the police sergeant stride towards the table, walk around to Sharma and bend to whisper urgently in his ear before standing upright to look at Mansoor. He listened to the rumbling lift, fading away to the lower floors, and wished that he was on it. There must be another way to the stairs. A fire exit? He'd always been drawn to the luxury here, never to such details. No, he couldn't leave. Mansoor fixed his gaze. The signs were there: the shaking voice, the darting eyes. Mansoor's hands were hidden below the table top. The voice was low like a growl.

"You're in no position to speak to me that way, man. Why, I could ..."

"Mansoor, Commissioner Gopal has been found dead in his office. You know that. Enquiries are ongoing. My understanding at this stage is that you have recently spoken to the deceased. You'll now come to the police station where you'll be able to help us with our investigation into this death ...and other matters. You are not under arrest at this stage. Come now."

He saw Mansoor stand, knocking the chair over behind him. This was the hell he'd expected. In those strange moments he stood to watch everything. The sergeant moved swiftly to Mansoor's side, hand over his open holster. Only Sharma remained seated.

"No need for all that, Mansoor. At this stage you are just answering questions. I'm afraid we'll have to postpone our conversation about my competence."

Mansoor's eyes were fixed on Sharma. His voice shook as he looked for control.

"We certainly will return to this, Sanjay. I'm so shocked to hear about my dear friend, Commissioner Gopal. I'll help you all I can although my most recent conversations with Ravi related only to official matters ... all recorded, of course. Rehman, would you be kind enough to summon the lift?"

As he started to move, Sharma spoke to him. "Before you do that, sah, please give your details to Sergeant Gupta. We may need to speak further with you." Funny, he often thought himself invisible at meetings but he was part of all this. He reached in his pocket for his business card. Don't say anything. Don't incriminate yourself.

The sergeant took his business card and looked at it dully before walking to the lift doors. Like a hotel attendant! He watched Sharma, followed by Mansoor and the sergeant, enter the lift and disappear. He was surprised that he'd not been taken along to the police station, but Sharma only had eyes for Mansoor. Mansoor was a slippery swine. He'd survive this even if those closest to him went down. Gopal had believed his promises, his lies, now he was gone. He stood in the centre of the room, thinking.

The bedroom door opened and she was there. Manisha. Mansoor's woman. She came to him, gliding through the sunlight, and put her arms around him. It was too easy to forget the brief times he'd spent with her – Mansoor was always too close – but he remembered them in this moment. She'd spent last night in Mansoor's bed but he wouldn't let himself think of that. As he held her his mind raced. Delhi, Mumbai, these were places where he could get lost before starting up again. He had money. This was an opportunity.

“Manisha, get your things together. You won’t need much. Remember what we said. This is our chance. Can you do it?”

She stepped back and looked at him with those smiling eyes. He felt her arms slide away and watched her walk towards the painting. She opened it to reveal a safe – a part of this room he hadn’t been allowed to see. Her fingers moved confidently across the numbers. The door was heavy. Piles of notes made him gasp. Mansoor’s money and they were taking it! The thought pleased him. His briefcase would be big enough and so would Manisha’s holdall.

When the safe was empty, he found himself laughing with her. He’d help her to forget Mansoor. They’d have time to talk to each other after so many long months of whispers. Being together had always been rushed. Out of breath, excited, he spoke loudly.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes. Come. Down the fire escape to the garage. I know which of Mansoor’s cars I want.”

Chapter 39. Seema.

Another morning's sun broke into the bedroom as she lay there alone. She'd slept for a while last night and that made her feel better. She sat up, trying to think about the day ahead but it was too easy to brood on the hours since Sanjay had left after the argument. A terrible silence owned the house and kept them all apart. Sanjay came and went as he pleased. Night time noises, downstairs, had been the only sign that he was at home. The girls' days held their shape - breakfast, school, home, bed – and sometimes their laughter lifted the mood for a short while but the time was heavy and the joy gone. Sanjay had been obsessed with cases before but the distance between them had never been so great. She got up, dressed quickly, as she heard the girls in the next room, their voices muffled and slow after sleep.

Pausing at the top of the steps outside the bedroom, she ran her hands over her stomach before looking across to the open door of the spare room picturing the new baby safely asleep amongst toys and colours. She'd decorate it herself if she had to. The divan in the middle of the room was crumpled. You didn't need to be a detective to know Sanjay had slept there. If he'd had the bad dreams then they hadn't disturbed anyone. Sanjay was a fool to himself and to his family.

*

Later, she sat alone in the empty house by the uncleared breakfast. She'd allowed the girls to leave everything there and moved them off for school earlier than usual. They hadn't minded. It would be good for them to be out of this house and amongst friends. There was nowhere for her to go today and no point pleading with Sanjay ... or Mansoor. Nothing could be changed.

She hadn't heard him come in. How long had he been watching her? Well, if he was ready for another argument then so was she. His face was pale but his eyes shone and he looked directly at her. He spoke quietly and clearly.

“Seema, come with me.”

She sat down again, turning away from him. It wasn't time yet to just do his bidding.

“Oh Sanjay, we’ve been through everything. What more is there to say? You have your work. Go! Do it and leave me alone.”

“Seema, look at me.” He knelt before her and she felt his hands gripping hers so that she looked straight into those eyes. “We must have the truth between us. I know the best way. Come with me now to the station. Meet with Mansoor...”

Suddenly she was faint and confused. This was madness. So stupid that she wanted to laugh. Her meetings with Mansoor had come between them, and Sanjay was asking her to ...

“Mansoor? The station ..? Sanjay, what ...”

“Mansoor’s in a cell. We brought him in for questioning yesterday but we can’t keep him for much longer. Not without charge. Everyone is talking about Gopal at the moment so it’s chaos. Mansoor is screaming murder but he’s telling us nothing.”

“Sanjay, this makes no sense ... Has Mansoor asked for me?”

Sanjay was silent, his expression difficult to read. Her thoughts continued to race ... meeting with Mansoor, Gopal, truth. There was no meaning in this. More questions formed.

“Do you want Mansoor to speak to me whilst you listen? Do you think that he will tell me things because we ...? Are you using your own wife to catch your enemy, Sanjay?”

This stung him, she could see, and for a few seconds she thought that he was going to leave her again. But his voice remained the same.

“Seema, I want an end to all this. The bad feelings between us, my pursuit of Mansoor ...”

“And your murder case? Sanjay Sharma cannot fail, eh?” She flung this at him, just as she had done when they argued before.

“Yes, I want that to end too. But Seema, I want to be settled with my family, the whole family. After this, I’ll find another job. Maybe we can leave, Magphur.

“I don’t believe any of this, Sanjay. You could never leave this place. The city’s in your blood. Just like your job. Family has always come second to these.” Her words weren’t loud but she saw that they cut. He looked down but still his rage didn’t come.

“That’s not true and I’ll prove it to you.” He faced her again and held out his hand. “If we’re still together after seeing Mansoor, you’ll have no more doubts.”

She stood, looking away from his hand, to walk to the middle of the room. Something had changed in him. This was the man she’d known before who could look at people’s thoughts. She saw the family photographs again, the ones of Sanjay standing so proud. The last few weeks, the meetings with Mansoor ... Tiredness was all she could feel. But no, she’d make no promises to Sanjay

“Alright, Sanjay. I’ll obey you as a wife should ... Don’t expect me to say what will happen after today. Let’s have the truth and see.”

She walked out of the house ahead of her husband. He’d follow.

*

Mansoor’s unshaven face lit up when he saw her. Several plastic coffee cups were spread on the wooden table in front of him and, as she entered the interview room with Sanjay, Gupta gathered these together. She saw the surprised look on the sergeant’s face as she sat next to her husband to face Mansoor. Such a different man to the one she’d seen in the apartment. He hadn’t slept. The expensive jacket was undone, showing his bulging stomach, and there was no silk tie. Dark, shiny patches of skin shone under his eyes and sweat shone on his top lip. His voice was hoarse but still strong.

“Seema! What a pleasant surprise. We usually meet in much more comfortable surroundings.”

Gupta left the room, giving Mansoor a deadly look, swearing under his breath. Still Mansoor's voice rasped across the table, challenging. He tore his eyes away from her to look at Sanjay.

"Let me go! Now! I've answered all your questions and you've no right to keep me here. You accuse me of everything and yet you give no proof. Then you bring Seema to witness all this. What game are you playing, Sharma? Let me go or bring me my lawyer. Where's Rehman? I want Rehman. Immediately!"

She jumped as Mansoor's fist crashed onto the table. Still he glared, seeming to feel no pain. Madness. Sanjay's reply was businesslike. His voice had made her feel safe when they were young and it did so now.

"Mansoor. We've taken Rehman and your companion Manisha into custody. They'd gone off in your car, along with a considerable amount of your money, and were getting out of Magphur fast. Good job we were watching your apartment. They almost had an accident. Unfortunately for them, they drew attention to themselves."

She saw Mansoor slump, his jaw working silently. Then he seemed to gather strength for more words as he gripped the chair's arms. She knew the signs of the coming storm. Sanjay leaned forward to speak again.

"You're right. We can prove nothing ... yet. But before you leave here I'm going to tell you something."

"I'm a busy man, damn you! I don't have time ..." Mansoor started to rise.

"But you *will* take time to listen to this. For the sake of the past that we share ... and because of Seema."

Her eyes met Mansoor's then and she shared his thoughts. He sank back into the chair, defeated only for the moment. Sanjay continued in the same tone as before.

"This is what I know. You know it too. You've shared a version of this story with Commissioner Gopal. I must take you back into the past; the Magphur Riots. Don't look so impatient, Mansoor, we must have this story tonight. Ralph Thomas, the Englishman, was a man about the same age as us then, a man with a future. Doris was also young. She was a lady who died very recently in Magphur and someone you should really

have met. They were lovers. They worked here for a charity, helping the street people of Magphur before the wealth came to the city. On the night of the riots they were putting out fires. A bucket chain. Ralph disappeared. What he saw and did next lived with him for ever and played a part in his recent death back in Magphur.”

Mansoor sighed and closed his eyes but she could tell that he was listening.

“We’ll never know why Ralph left Doris’s side that night long ago. Fear? Maybe he was trying to escape from her and from Magphur even then. Anyway, I believe he saw two things. The first was the temple being looted, the second was young Gopal ordering his men to fire on ordinary people – those trying to escape died alongside those who were destroying Magphur. This brave act was the start of our late Commissioner’s rise. He had friends in high places, as you know, and any wrong doing was hushed up as much as possible. Only the street people, witnesses, people with no power, truly remember.”

Mansoor opened his eyes and looked at her, “This story bores me, Sanjay. What’s all this got to do with Seema and me? This isn’t the past that we know.”

“During the mess and the chaos even well-drilled policemen became separated. Many of Gopal’s men were killed around him. He was one of the lucky ones. I believe that Thomas somehow picked up The Magphur Star from the body of a looter. Gopal saw this. In his madness, he wanted the statue. He must have been a very different man then. Rather than shoot down an Englishman, even amongst the terror there were people watching, he hatched a plot with Thomas to hide the gold – in the city quarter which no longer exists. It may even be somewhere under all the new building.”

“Give me some water! I can’t take much more of this crap. Just let me go!” Mansoor’s voice was cracking now, his hands had become white, bloodless fists. Quietly she went to the water cooler, the one luxury in the place, and brought him a plastic tumbler of water. Where was Sanjay leading them? She looked into Mansoor’s face as he took the water from her and knew the end was near. Sanjay’s voice was there again as she sat beside him.

“But Gopal was treacherous, greedy. He wanted the valuable statue for himself. They fought, violently, Ralph was injured. Remember, these were not the old men that we saw. They were young in a wild time. He managed to make his way across the city to Doris who looked after him. When he was well enough, he left her. Left Magphur, through fear or a lack of love I don’t know. But he returned here to die. Just like Doris. They died in the place where they were young, near each other. Call it Fate, if you like. We’ll never know whether Ralph Thomas thought he was saving The Magphur Star or whether he was stealing it. I prefer the first story. Gopal wanted the statue, nothing more. He must have been convincing on that night, made promises to Ralph before attacking him. He knew Ralph Thomas by name. He never forgot the young man who’d escaped him and knew that the old man had returned to Magphur. And that’s where you enter the story, my friend.”

Mansoor was staring at Sanjay and she was afraid.

“You and Gopal had a very interesting relationship. You fed him information about crime and he used his influence to ease your path. He found a way to work in the new Magphur and you gained power with his help. In his position, with lists of foreigners coming to the city, he knew that Ralph Thomas was returning for he’d never forgotten that name and never forgotten that Ralph had seen a different side of him. He asked for your help and you sent some of your goondas to kill the old man. You chose some experience for this. The boy Ashwin pulled the trigger, killed Ralph Thomas. We have had him in custody. He talked, eventually. Just a scared kid in the end. Unfortunately for you, that loudmouth Rajid Patel was also part of the group, wanting to be a big man, a gangster. He was never going to keep his mouth shut so you had him killed too – on the street in front of his wife. But then you always did like to be in total control, didn’t you Mansoor? You’d already gone too far when you had Manish killed just because he couldn’t be one of your thugs. Didn’t have the instincts, the guts. He was my friend’s brother, Mansoor. From that moment, it all became even more personal for me.”

“This has always been personal for you, Sanjay. You want me dead and buried. You think I need to involve myself with street killers when I have such powerful friends?” The voice was a snarl. “Why, Commissioner Gopal ...”

“Ah yes, Gopal. It comes back to him. At the end he was an old man clinging to his position, waiting for his working life to finish. You began to blackmail him. You knew his past, knew of his dealings and bribery. And like the street rat you still are you sensed his weakness, wringing as much money out of him as you could. You had his office searched, you wanted to find any evidence you could to use against him. In the end, he put a bullet in his brain. He knew you’d never leave him in peace.”

“This is an interesting tale, Sanjay, but, as you say, there’s no proof that any of it is true.” She saw that smile and she remembered how he’d charmed her in his apartment. These quieter, calmer words were just more of his tools. “Now, my friend, you really must excuse me.” He started to rise, buttoning up his jacket.

“One more thing interests me, Mansoor. Did you ever hope that Gopal would lead you to The Magphur Star?”

“The Magphur Star!” The words were spat out. “Why would I need that? A thing no longer of any value. I could buy a load of such trinkets now. So, why the hell would I ?”

“Because you want respect, Mansoor, because you want credit in the new Magphur as well as the old. Finding it would give you the right kind of publicity. Was that the one thing Gopal refused to give you? Was that another reason for having his office searched?”

“I’m going now, you’ve kept me too long. You’ve made a fool of yourself, Sanjay. Your story’s ridiculous. I’m not saying anything until another of my lawyers is here.”

Mansoor stood up straight, his eyes looking over their heads towards the door. She wondered how close to the truth Sanjay was and how close to breaking point Mansoor had come. How close was he now? Suddenly, Mansoor leaned across the table, his face closer to Sanjay. Spittle frothed his mouth.

“You think Gopal was my only powerful friend, eh? I can make your life hell ... like that.” He snapped his fingers in her husband’s face so that she blinked, expecting him to strike out. “I still have a file on you – witnesses, proof – and I can bring you down. That fight we started years ago? It’s still going on, will always go on.”

“You’re free to go, Mansoor.” Sanjay held Mansoor’s wild stare, his voice tight. “But you’re right. This isn’t over. The investigation will continue. You may not be able to buy a new Commissioner ...”

Then she saw the change in Mansoor. Like someone flicking a switch.

“To hell with your investigation. This is you and me. I tell you, Seema has come to me many times. To my home. And she wanted to. You understand? She wanted to be with me. She knows you now, knows what you are. Oh yes, Sanjay Sharma, who rose from the gutter to become a hero, a man of the people. Well, your wife knows you. Hah!” His voice whined and probed. “The poor boy – just a helper, a bystander - who witnessed a brutal killing and turned to the right path, left the gangs behind... No, *Captain* Sharma, you were more than a witness. Much more. I’ll say this to you, loudly in the place where you are such a big man. Here, in front of your wife. You want truth, I’ll give you the whole truth. You held that boy by the fire, stopped him running away whilst ... whilst he was killed. No better than a street criminal, even now in your uniform. Yes, Seema knows ...”

She watched in horror as they stood and closed on each other. They fell together, breaking chairs, overturning the table, bruising her shin so that she threw herself into the corner to crouch beneath the madness. She screamed.

“Sanjay! ... Mansoor!... Stop!”

But it was too late. They rolled, punched and clawed. A street fight. Mansoor was standing, kicking blindly at Sanjay as he lay reaching desperately for a hold. Then both were on their feet, circling, looking for an attack. Sanjay moved first to thrust his fist into Mansoor’s stomach. They clung to each other – twisting, turning and leaving their sweat on the dull wall. Mansoor was swinging a jagged chair leg when Sanjay’s

forehead cracked against his nose. Dropping the weapon, howling, he swayed back to the wall clutching his face. For seconds they stood, panting, facing each other, their blood joined again. She found her voice.

“Gupta! Gupta, come! They’re killing each other ...”

Mansoor looked at her wildly then jolted forward, his hands like claws. Sanjay kicked away the chair’s broken wood and stood in front of her. She thought, really for the first time, that this could end in death.

Then the door flew open to her left. Gupta was striding, leaping over the shattered table to stand between the two men. He pushed Sanjay away, hard against the wall close to her. Then he had moved swiftly behind Mansoor to wrap his arms around the writhing body, gritting his teeth as heels hit his shins.

“Let me go, damn you! You’ve kept me here without charge. You can’t do this ...” Mansoor, still full of hatred but still speaking of rights. Then he fell forward exhausted and only Gupta’s arms kept him upright.

She stepped towards them. At a nod from Sanjay, Gupta dropped Mansoor’s arms but stood right behind him, almost touching. Her husband spoke through damaged lips; she wanted to go to him.

“He’s right ... He must go. We’ll finish this when ...”

Gupta’s face showed shock. “But Captain, he attacked you. You can’t let him go.”

Sanjay shook his head, no more to give, and she went to his side. It was her turn to speak.

“Mansoor, listen. This is our last meeting. When I came to you it was to stop this war between Sanjay and you. Nothing more. I didn’t want things to get this far. When you spoke to me softly, I was thinking of Sanjay. When you made me promises, showed me another way of living, I was thinking of my family. And when you told me you would stop hating Sanjay, I believed you. I’ve seen you truly tonight. You talk about the past, about the boy’s death and about Sanjay’s part in all that. You think I didn’t know? Remember ... I have lived with my husband’s nightmares and I’ve listened to those screamed words which told me everything. I know my husband.”

“Was that true for the whole time you were with me, Seema?” Mansoor was still fighting with his words

“The whole time. Every second of my time with you was meant to stop nights like this – to stop you hurting Sanjay in any way.”

She watched Mansoor’s eyes die, as though she had struck him harder than Sanjay ever could. He tried to lift himself, push back his shoulders, but she knew he was finished and that she’d broken him.

Slowly, Mansoor turned to shuffle through the mess and out of the room.

Chapter 40. Surbjit.

He saw her red hair in the market crowd. She'd stood outside The Park Hotel in front of her shouting man – the one who was shot. His father had shown him the story in the paper. Her pain must be like the pain he felt for Manish. Work forgotten, he watched her – stopping, starting, looking around. Her headscarf had come loose and, caught in the collar of her shirt, was flowing freely behind her like her hair. Buyers, stall-holders watched her too. Red hair! The street corner boys, six of them, followed her with their eyes, unsmiling, waiting for a chance to show off. One of them shouldered himself away from the wall and started to walk towards her. Worrying signs.

Then the policewoman tripped into the sunlight, sweating and breathing hard, looking left and right. She couldn't miss the red, could she? The gang turned back to their wall not wanting trouble. The red haired one, chased by the police? If she escaped she could never be safe alone. Not all the gangs would turn away so quickly, not all the police were so slow. She ran to the shadow of the most crowded stall, just as he would have done, replacing her headscarf as she went. Good. She looked like just another tourist now. The policewoman ran on, shouting into her phone. Gone. The lady stepped into the sun again.

He left the stall. Business was slow today anyway so Father could stand up to the work. He wouldn't be away long.

“Surbjit! What are you doing?”

One quick wave to his father was all he could do for she'd started to walk again. Moving fast! She stopped to look around her. She needed a guide. He prepared his best smile and ran to her side.

“Ma'am?”

She turned to look down at him, began to move away, but then smiled back, slowly at first. She wasn't turning her eyes away and this pleased him. Then she relaxed a little and she was his.

“Ma'am? Would you like a tour? I offer the best price to see the main parts of Magphur.”

“Oh no, thank you. I can find my own way.”

“Ma’am, it is better not to be alone. I know all the short cuts to all the best sights of the city – the shops, the temples. When you are with, Surbjit,” he patted his chest, tourists seemed to find this funny, “you will be safe. No-one will bother you.” He stood back, watching her, making his smile even bigger as she looked all around his face.

“That’s a real shiner you’ve got there.”

Strange words, but they made him lift his hand towards the bruises. Sharma came to his mind as he moved his head from side to side showing her his hurt did not matter. He’d have to keep his face turned away as much as he could. She was softening now, he knew. One more push.

“I can show you places where there is no heat, places where you can rest.”

“Alright, Surbjit,” she was looking around as she spoke. “Show me Magphur. Might as well enjoy myself while I can.”

*

Much later, he remembered the tour clearly. The lady was most interested in the Archa Street shops and one temple was enough. She wanted to look at the life, to see the people and their ways of doing things – the families, the children. Many tourists were like that. But with her, everything was new. She was free and her face said this. He thought she was interesting; not just the different hair, covered apart from when she tried on a new headscarf, but the way she was happy some times and sad at others. She spoke kindly to him. When he told her about the city, he caught her looking around as if someone was going to come and take her away. In this way she was just like the old man, Ralph.

*

It was late morning and the heat was making her tired. He watched her fanning her pale face and her shiny cheeks as she looked round for a place to sit.

“Ma’am, you want me to guide you back to your hotel, all part of the service, or maybe a tea shop?”

“No, Surbjit. You’ve been great. Here, let me pay you. I can make my own way now.”

He didn’t believe this. Her eyes were moving around as she smiled and handed him money. No price had been spoken, he took what she offered. But he was afraid for her. They were in the older part of the city, near his home. He could take her past there on the way to the hotel and maybe invite her to sit outside his house for a while in the cool. If she chose to pay him more, well so be it.

“I promise you, I know a short cut to your hotel through the quieter part of Magphur. Ma’am, trust me, the heat will only get worse for you.” He smiled again.

She considered for a while and then, with a nod, said yes. And so they began their walk together. She smiled less as they left the busiest streets behind - maybe it was the heat, maybe she was thinking about going back to the hotel, always so dark but a good place to find clients. Yes, it would be right to stop in his alleyway. Twice they passed policemen and twice he saw her pull her headscarf across her face and look to the ground. She shouldn’t look as if she was hiding. Just walk, head up! What was happening in her life? No, there wasn’t time to worry about someone else for all such problems were behind him. Money was enough. This route would take them past the police station. That could be a mistake. But if she got nervous there were plenty of doorways to dive into.

Then he saw the police station where he’d met with Sharma so many times. The steps were full of people, coming and going, arguing and pushing. Ralph Thomas and Manish, the lady’s husband were all in the past. Sharma and Mansoor could be forgotten. She’d stopped and was looking across the road to the station. The headscarf had moved back from her face and he could see her staring, green eyes. Her voice was quiet and steady.

“That’s that man Sharma.”

He followed her gaze through the traffic. Sharma was standing at the top of the steps with his wife and Gupta. He gasped. Even from this distance he could see the blood on Sharma’s face. One or two of the old men who always sat on the steps for as long as they could were pointing at him. But they weren’t only looking at Sharma. There was Mansoor, cut and bruised, walking through the traffic and the hooting horns towards his car on the other side of the road, leaning on car bonnets to make his way. But this was not the same man, something had happened to him. The driver was standing, his back to them, holding the car door open, unable to move to his boss through all the cars. Mansoor still walked with his head down.

“Mansoor...”

The word escaped him, meant for no-one, but his voice stopped her moving away. She fixed her eyes on Mansoor as he forced his way through the noise. It was like a movie, not real, as she moved forward, scarf gone, hair free again. He reached out to stop her, the road was a killer, but it was too late. The driver was opening the door even wider when she threw herself at Mansoor knocking him back towards the traffic as it started to move again. He saw his shocked face, mouth wide, and he saw the arms spinning like he was falling from a high place. Then Mansoor disappeared. The cattle truck hit him with its front wheels, then with the back wheels, before stopping. He couldn’t look at Mansoor. His eyes were fixed on the strange lady who stood staring down at the crushed body while blood flowed into the gutter.

He knelt by the side of the road and was sick as Sharma and Gupta reached him. Looking up through his tears, he saw Sharma’s wife covering the red hair before police blocked his view.

Epilogue.

The Magphur night is lit brightly and the work goes on. Apartment blocks have to be finished and so workers climb scaffolding towards the sky. Machinery grinds, hums and howls and amongst all this there is shouting, swearing and laughter. The new landscape is taking final shape.

Down amongst the churned mud a group of men stand looking into a muddy crater. Something has halted this small part of the work. The lights show them every contour and rough edge in the hole. Work on new foundations has been held up. They shout to one man who has slipped and slithered down a held rope into the shallow filth below.

“C’mon Hanu, get your hands in there. Could be valuable.”

“Could be a bomb. Let’s get out of here lads. Throw the rope in after him.” The laughter grows at the muffled swearing from below.

At last Hanu appears, caked in levels of slurry, and, accepting the jokes, shows a wooden box. He kneels and places it in the middle of a tyre track at his workmates’ feet. The wood is old, split in places, easy to smash open.

“Shall we hand it to the boss?”

“No chance, could be money. Equal shares, yeah?”

“Damn right, I’ve bust my balls on this job. Time for a bonus.”

A swift hammer blow and the box splinters open. All look in. There are no words. The gold figure, lying on its back, gleams dully, smeared with many years of muck. The base is a circle, the stem twists and winds ornately to the eight pronged star; one of the points has been snapped in half, ruined. The men are quiet. All can see that the green ruby at the star’s centre is intact and that’s where the value lies.

The foreman, fat and out of breath, elbows the young ones away. It's his job to be angry when the work stops so no-one really listens. Besides, the treasure has their attention.

"What the hell's happening? Who told you to take a break? I'll skin every one of you bastards if you don't ..."

He stops when he sees the dirty, gold star. He's been a long time on building sites. He's seen everything. He bends down, wheezing, to pick up the box. Nanu, the finder, smiles, hoping for praise or, better still, a reward. Instead, the boss looks around at all the workers, his voice more quiet than they have ever heard.

"Lads, we need to get the police in. I think I know what this is."

*

On the other side of Magphur, Captain Sanjay Sharma sleeps peacefully beside his wife, his uniform draped carelessly over the foot of the bed. His mobile buzzes five, six, times before he finally stirs, picks up, sits and listens. His heart jumps, but he keeps calm.

"Okay, I'll be there."

Shaking away the deep sleep, he presses the usual mobile button before turning once to smile at Seema who watches him. He looks away as he hears the voice, takes in the information and clears his throat to speak.

"Alright, Amarjit. Got it. Pick me up in ten minutes."

Not a murder this time. A discovery. And one which makes him smile because it brings an ending. Or does it? Surbjit's smile vanishes when he thinks of Manish. Rhiannon sits alone. Witnesses saw the big man staggering through the traffic, seeing nothing. A few, just a few, thought the woman was trying to save the poor fool.

Two cases he'll help solve. Two people he won't leave.

The Critical Commentary.

The Critical Commentary

Introduction.

Magphur Past, my first attempt at writing a detective novel, is set in contemporary India where I spent two periods of time teaching and travelling with my family under a scheme organised by the British Council. Magphur is a city which is an imaginary, fictionalised interpretation of some of the sights and sounds of Jalandhar where I worked and stayed. My memories of India, even with six years' distance, remain powerful. This fact, together with my strong desire to write detective fiction, made it inevitable that I would give my first foray into the genre an Indian setting.

Part of preparing to depict a human landscape as varied as India is to watch and listen more than ever. The experience over, there is the quiet process of recall. In Jalandhar, there were the classrooms in which I observed lessons, taught, and was assessed by teachers sitting amongst the students; there were the teeming corridors, language filled, and chaotic streets where my family and I were stared at, photographed and welcomed. I easily remember the cooler, secluded garden of our hosts' home from where we would emerge to be driven or led through the old and new parts of the crowded city. As I write, my mind returns to the afternoon I addressed the gathered staff of the school, all women and all wearing beautiful saris, and was questioned closely on my teaching experience. Whenever I contact Indian friends on social media their presence fills my mind.

My first thoughts about recording this lifestyle when back in England concerned writing a travel journal. However, further consideration told me that my work was only ever going to be in the form of a detective novel – one which, whilst telling a story, would seek to capture my experience of a place and its variety. My wish to portray many facets of an Indian city, Magphur, was the start of my journey towards a multi-focal narrative.

My interest in detective fiction, always strong, grew during my time studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University. I became particularly interested in the concepts of the unreliable narrator, the irony instigated by free indirect discourse indicating character perspective, the flawed hero and

the mechanics of building a plot. I also became fascinated by the way in which narrative styles have developed over generations of detective fiction – ranging from the writer’s use of the omniscient storyteller to multi-focalisation. I suggest that the character of the central detective becomes increasingly complex and many sided in the contemporary novels of, for example, Peter May, Kate Rhodes, Elly Griffiths and Val McDermid. Throughout my studies and planning, one question kept returning to me. Could I develop my characters, and write a satisfying detective story, in the narrative form and structure which I had chosen for *Magphur Past*? I remain aware of the strong structural devices of the genre, concerning plot and character, as outlined by Van Dine, T.S. Eliot and Raymond Chandler and I refer to these during this thesis.

I took opportunities to gain information concerning the above question whenever I attended writers’ conferences and workshops. I listened to and spoke with Ian Rankin at the British Library on 2nd December, 2018. There was the *Murder Will Out* conference at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, on 8th June, 2019 and then the crime writers’ weekend in Southwold on 15th and 16th June 2019. Speakers at these last two events included Alison Bruce, Simon Brett, Elly Griffiths, Rory Clements and Mick Herron. The importance of creating a strong central detective, whatever the narrative style chosen for the genre, was a clear message. I attended talks by Elly Griffiths, on 8th June 2019 and on 7th February 2020, and asked about the process of multi-focalisation and her answer left me in no doubt about the challenge of balancing and blending character storylines within a paced plot. She spoke about how she works to make her detective, Ruth Galloway, more visible and developed amongst intertwining character plotlines in her multi-focal novels. She emphasised the importance of each writer establishing their own style of creative dialogue with their characters.

My critical commentary is divided into three chapters. In Chapter One, I discuss the nature of multi-focalisation and give reasons for my use of free indirect discourse with its capacity to highlight voice and character. I refer to the views of Genette, Todorov and Friedman on focalisation and I engage with further research on multi-perspectivity, polyphony, heteroglossia and dialogue which influenced my writing. I show how I use *Magphur* as a device to shape my novel so that the city becomes an arena for a character driven

plot. Alison's work on design and pattern in narrative was an inspiration when forming my novel. Central to the process of gathering perspectives is the creative dialogue between the writer and each character. Bal's views on narrative structure were influential here. I illustrate and examine the use of multi-focalisation and free indirect discourse by discussing novels by Ian Rankin and Alison Bruce.

In Chapter Two I clarify my use of space not just as a device for shaping my novel but as a force which brings character perspectives together. I also indicate features of the writer/character creative dialogue which evolved during the preparation and composition of *Magphur Past*. The writing process, including the delineation of the detective's workplace, is studied in the context of Bakhtin's theory of chronotopes. Again, several writers' portrayals of a working environment are discussed and I revisit my own police station and surroundings in *Magphur Past* with the intention of showing how my characters' perspectives differ concerning this important space.

In Chapter Three, I hone my study of multi-focalisation down to two characters: the detective and the assistant. I discuss the compositional lines of the detective novel as suggested by Van Dine, Eliot and Chandler. Referring to the research of Propp, Greimas and Malmgren, I emphasise the centrality of this partnership in the literary tradition and in the detective fiction genre. I also stress its importance in the context of multi-focalisation. I turn to modern critics Bradley and Quartey to help identify the salient features of the two characters and I examine ways in which writers have portrayed their relationship. Evidence from the novels of Conan Doyle, Christie, Sayers, Griffiths and George is included in my study of how different perspectives are portrayed within these roles. I view multi-focalisation as a means of stretching the structural boundaries of detective fiction.

Finally, I discuss the figure of Sanjay Sharma, my detective, as he appears and develops in the context of the narrative form of *Magphur Past*. I trust that this view will encapsulate the challenges of character development in a multi-focal text and illustrate how they can be met.

Chapter One. An overview of the narrative pattern of “Magphur Past” and the use of multi-focalisation in detective fiction.

Multi-focalisation, multiperspectivity and the novel’s chronotope.

Sanjay Sharma, the main investigator, is one voice amongst many in my multi-focal detective novel. Each of my focalising agents offer their individual perceptions on actions, places and events. This feature of *Magphur Past* is a useful starting point for a discussion of the aspects of focalisation which led me to my novel’s narrative style. I changed the narrative mode in each redraft of my novel. The journey from omniscient narrator to multi-focalisation ran alongside a consideration of how to organise a line of events as seen through the eyes of a range of characters. Most significant for me was the way in which my author’s voice needed to be subsumed into the voices of a spectrum of characters or focalising agents.

Genette separates character viewpoint, and narrative style, into zero, external and internal focalisation. He writes, “in every narrative we define the narrator’s status both by its narrative level and by its relationship to the story” (1983, p. 248). He indicates that a narrator may be a character in a text, an omniscient storyteller or even a mixture of the two. Todorov realigns Genette’s narrative divisions with the idea that the narrator knows more than the characters in zero focalisation, knows less than the characters in external focalisation and knows as much as the characters in internal focalisation where the author can access the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings. Using Henry James’s term “reflector” – a character who perceives and is perceived – Todorov writes “if the other characters are above all images reflected in a consciousness, the reflector is that consciousness itself” (1981. P. 34). The reader will experience everything through the eyes and thoughts of a character narrator who, Todorov believes, “incarnates the principles from which judgments of value are brought to bear” (1981, p. 38). Niederhoff (2011) draws attention to the sub-types within Todorov’s categorisation: fixed, where one character serves as a focaliser throughout the story; variable, which involves a range of focalisers taking turns; and multiple, where changing focalisers give different versions of the same event.

Genette's terminology has been further echoed, challenged and adapted. Niederhoff (2011), examining perspective and point of view, highlights Friedman's proposal that the characteristics of the above sub-groups of variable and multiple focalisation could be placed together under the term "multi-focalisation." Friedman's change of emphasis gives the multi-focal approach more credit as a distinct and important narrative style. Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu (2016) reflect and reframe Genette's work by writing about the focaliser's distance from the story world. A focaliser may stand away from actions and events or at the centre of represented occurrences. In a multi-focal text, one character may appear to watch and comment on the lives of others whilst another character may be directly involved in shaping situations and events. Indeed, as I found when structuring and writing *Magphur Past*, each character may shift between these roles at different stages of the plot; at one time they may occupy a hetero-diegetic position, as they react to occurrences, and at another time they may adopt a homo-diegetic position as they shape events.

Friedman uses the word "spatialization" to describe the feature of handing a story over to a series of focalisers, each with their own personality, purpose and viewpoint. This level of character authority, she writes, adds "multiple resonances to the characters' movement through space and time" (1993, p. 15). Each character can have their own storyline. Organising a text in this way is a delicate, selective narrative task which calls for the writer to be totally familiar with his or her characters. The writer is a background orchestrator of what Bal calls "the agents of perception and interpretation" (2017, p. 10). Busch is of a similar view concerning the relationship between the writer and the characters in a multi-focal text and he also emphasises the importance of reader autonomy. He identifies "a certain equality among all focalisers" (1994, p.6). He continues by saying that, as readers, whenever "we receive insight into several characters' minds without any form of direct, let alone reliable, evaluation, it is up to us to decide with which of the voices we agree" (1994, p. 7). Dasgupta picks up this line of argument and, in an essay on *Tokyo Cancelled*, his own novel which expresses a world-view through "a multiplicity of tales," writes "The challenge of what, if anything, can finally be assembled from such multiplicity is the reader's own" (2011, p. 7). Busch qualifies his own line of argument by stressing that, even though some writers appear to hand the story's

events over to the characters, this “does not mean that they are relinquishing their authority” (1994, p. 7). Bal inserts the point that, in a situation where there are several focalisers, “there is usually no doubt in our minds which character should receive the most attention and sympathy” (2017, p. 136). I argue that a multi-focal narrative, in which the perspectives of focalisers are spread evenly, can leave the choice of identification and empathy open to the reader. Such rapport can be spread over several characters.

The term “multiperspectivity” is discussed by Nunning and Nunning (2011) who view the concept as a collective term for a range of narrative methods in which an event, an era or a character is presented from different angles. Hartner (2011) agrees with this and, whilst taking account of the opinion that multiperspectivity is a natural part of any story in which characters show different viewpoints, emphasises that an important feature of the phenomenon is its capacity to swiftly highlight the clashes between the characters’ ideologies. Hartner believes that the most practical use of multiperspectivity, when composing a story, is for it to be confined to plot sections where the same occurrence is portrayed from differing angles. In *Magphur Past*, the only single events which are viewed from more than one perspective, for example the market-place fight between Mansoor and Sanjay, are those in the past. Characters view these through a process of analepsis. My novel has a linear plot, taken up by each character in turn. This debate, with its emphasis on depicting a range of character viewpoints, suggests that the challenge of developing plot and character in a multi-focal form lies with using the most unobtrusive of authorial touches when directing matters.

I wish to start the examination of my use of multiperspectivity by viewing its application to a setting – Magphur. Genette believes that “the temporal determinations of the narrating instance are manifestly more important than its spatial determinations” (1983, p. 215). I argue that space and time are of equal importance in *Magphur Past*. The physical space in which my story is set is the foundation of its chronological events or fabula. An English tourist is murdered, an Indian detective investigates by questioning a range of characters who each have a different relationship with a city undergoing changes to its culture and to its appearance. The resolution of the enquiry occurs as a result of character interaction as much as by due investigative

process. As the story, alongside our knowledge of characters, deepens, our sense and understanding of the place expands at the same pace as the characters' awareness of themselves. During the course of the plot, the characters' perceptions of Magphur undergo change. Debord, using terms which could describe old and new Magphur, writes about "the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres" (1955, p. 5). Bridgeman indicates a view of place which relates to reader perspective, but it could also be connected to character perspective. She writes that the "association of certain locations with the events that occur in them is particularly strong in our reading of narrative" (2007, p. 56). My characters apply differing values and perspectives to the various sections of Magphur. The old city is associated with people living in close family links which afford comfort but which are also units for survival. The new city fosters separateness and the cold pursuit of profit and possessions. This was my opening creative framework, polarised in the early stages, for *Magphur Past*.

At this point I must indicate the basic shape of Magphur, the starting point for my story plan. Creating my setting concerned a process linked to psychogeography. My imagination, assisted by memory, shaped my city and my aims concerning narrative form during the preparation period. The winding, narrow alleyways of the old town spread in all directions from the central market place. In these narrow thoroughfares the flat roofed, small roomed houses overlap each other and it is in the far reaches of these that Surbjit lives closely with his family. Magphur is a place of variation. Amidst the community of the alleyways the landmarks include the Hindu and Sikh temples, the Muslim minaret, Archa Street with the larger shops and Kumar street where the established business people live. My memory of Jalandhar shows me middle order wealth existing within easy reach of poverty. On the other side of the market place, within distant sight of the poorer quarter, offices and apartments rise; a new place of wealth bringing a different, as yet unshaped, order. There is no mention of religion in my description of this area. Sashi's coach journey, in Chapter Two, shows us the bustling roads which skirt the whole city. Sharma, in Chapter Six, drives along the new Dimpal Highway and muses that streets "where he had played were now beneath half built office blocks" (p. 41). The river, which forms one of Manish's final memories, snakes through both the old and the

new parts of the city. In Chapter Three, Ralph notices the process of change. He recognises houses, but “nearby there was a stretch of rocky earth where more such buildings, a community, had once been. Workmen were erecting scaffolding in one corner of this emptied area” (p. 20).

This is my mental map of Maghpur, that feature which Bridgeman (2007) calls the “measureable and geometric features of the narrative world” (p. 60). The format of my city, with the old existing in sight of the new, is the binding force of my multi-focal narrative which establishes a pattern in the lives of my characters. As my consideration of themes, characters and events deepened, I gave new consideration to Debord’s phrase “disctinct psychic atmospheres,” so that, with each draft, I felt able to move, redesign and find new ways of describing the Magphur landscape to mirror my characters’ thought patterns.

Alison, in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, her very accessible and precisely constructed account of narrative design, discusses the influence of the wave form on a story structure where one scene corresponds with another. She writes about storylines in which an early description is mirrored by a later one “with similar objects or places but now in a different light, clarifying what’s changed” (2019, p.73). Her phrase “symmetrical moments on either side” (2019, p.73) intrigued and interested me so that, mulling over different interpretations of her words, I came to consider not only plot structure but a life pattern common to my characters; each of them is at the most difficult stage of a finely balanced life choice. With every draft, and with each discussion concerning *Magphur Past*, my knowledge of my characters increased so that I began to live within their psyches and alongside the rhythm of their lives. I came to think of people who are experiencing an essential moral conflict, over the same period of time, each in their own way. Besides suiting my desire to create an image of a bustling and contradictory city, multi-focalisation became my chosen method of depicting the range of inner struggles within a section of its inhabitants.

The pattern of the city, and the pattern of *Magphur Past*, concerns past alongside present and an old way of life existing uneasily in close proximity to a new one. The plot also poses good against evil, with the formation of the new city placing daunting questions and temptations before the characters. Each character, on whichever side of the legal boundaries they live, has a moral choice to make. This certainly applies to

Sanjay, Surbjit, Gupta, Seema and Rhiannon. But such a conundrum is also present in the lives of Mansoor, Rajid, Rehman and Gopal all of whom glimpse a life away from corruption. I aimed for this inner debate to form a sense of symmetry in each of my character's stories and I wanted this to be discerned behind the range of views which they display.

In *Magphur Past*, the characters' differing views of the city indicate contrasting perceptions and perspectives and these inspire a range of actions and reactions. By allowing each of my characters to hold centre stage in turn, and by permitting them to express their world-views, many of these largely shaped by their relationship with Magphur, they reveal strengths, weaknesses and the disparity between their opinions of themselves and the ways in which they are viewed by others, including the reader. This is the irony which is highlighted by multi-focalisation. Thinking of the storyteller as a background orchestrator, as Friedman has suggested, Magphur – with its ethos of survival, monetary gain and upward mobility - is my compositional tool, a narrative thread, which helps me to manage plot and character.

The city is the core of my characters' lives whatever course they take. Sanjay attempts to bring order to Magphur whilst hiding a criminal past spent on the same streets. Surbjit is fast witted on the old Magphur thoroughfares, his world-view is uncluttered when working in the market, yet later he struggles with the devious ways of adults in the changing city and his assimilation of this conflict becomes a rite of passage. Manish is unable to adapt to the growing savagery of the new Magphur when, anxious for fast money and respect which his old life will not provide, he falls in with the street gangs; for him, too much change happens too quickly. Seema, to protect Sanjay, makes an appeal to Mansoor, becomes drawn to the luxuries and change of pace which the new city offers, and puts her own family life at risk. Doris and Ralph view Magphur through the prism of past events and cannot separate the city from the time of their youth so that the changed landscape becomes mesmerising and there is the sense that they are making their final journeys. The villains Mansoor and Rajid see the new Magphur as another opportunity to become wealthy by any means, but even they sometimes struggle to keep elements of their humanity hidden. Mansoor, like Rehman, looks down at the old city from his new, luxurious apartment and ponders with triumph his journey towards

wealth from humble beginnings yet part of him is nostalgic for a simpler time. Rajid shows fear behind the bravado as the Magphur underworld draws him into a depth which he cannot handle. Rhiannon, who has struggled to maintain a sense of loyalty towards her husband, rediscovers self-respect and a balanced view of life as she wanders through the night viewing Magphur's changing face. The city shows her a newer expanding way of life, dangerous but free. This is an overview of my compositional use of space.

A consideration of how to use time was also a crucial part of creating the pattern and the multi-focal narrative structure of *Magphur Past* with its contrasting outlooks. Characters sometimes select their views of the past and format these into an idiosyncratic perspective. As Jahn (2007) writes, "a remembering reflector may also split into a current and a past self" (p. 100). For example, as Doris and Ralph are guided through modern Magphur, by Surbjit and by Tony's driver respectively, their minds spend time on the sights and the atmosphere of their youth. These sequences are more than the bitter/sweet, consolidatory journeys mentioned above, they hark back to the source of a crime and information concerning this is suggested to the reader. Further to this, when time is viewed in connection with some characters, as Bal writes, it is "... thick and complex, not at all linear and single stranded" (2017, p. 66). Seema shows the reader the legend of the young Sanjay defying and defeating the fearsome Mansoor in the market place. This is a received version of the past, a mantra, an urban myth of the Magphur streets which has made Sanjay a hero. Sanjay pushes the violence of his youth into the underworld of his nightmares, showing only partial honesty to Seema. The irony is that Seema is fully aware, through Sanjay's dreams, of the more brutal, much less heroic, aspects of her husband's past with the gangs. She chooses to reveal her knowledge, as a defence against Mansoor who is threatening her husband, only in the final chapter when she answers her own moral questions. The version of the fight which Seema gives to the readers is also a reminiscence of her own youth as it is intermingled with memories of Sanjay's courtship.

My narrative makes further use of analepsis, flashback, with views of the past filtered through character perspective. For example, Gopal, more consciously manipulative of adapting the past than the other characters mentioned here, actively changes views of his own young life by shredding documentary

evidence of anything which could spoil his carefully constructed image. He has solidified the past into a form which does not bring into doubt his belief that he has done everything for the good of Magphur.

The treatment of the present in *Magphur Past*, as well as the view presented of times gone by, also highlights character perspective. Puckett writes that “to be human is to understand or to perceive oneself as living in time and space in a particular way” (2016, p.15). This perception shapes characters’ behaviour and actions. For example, Gupta sees life as a quest to prove himself. The reader can become involved in his journey towards self-respect as he climbs the scaffolding in the new Magphur. His rediscovered confidence when he finds valuable evidence on top of the tower and his satisfaction when the much younger Pradha conspicuously fails by falling is another step on his quest. Surbjit’s attempts in the opening chapter to escape from his old school-friends, now members of a street gang, is its own tale with a separate range of events and emotions; the boy is seeking a better life. Each of these example chapters involving Gupta and Surbjit, Sharma’s assistants, have their own spatiotemporal structure, their own chronotope. Gupta’s renewed pride and Surbjit attaining the safety of the market stall are endings to story sections.

The challenge of multi-focalisation is to maintain the flow of the storyline without allowing these self-contained sections, each one adding to the reader’s knowledge of a character, to take away impetus from the main plot line – the search for a murderer – or from the chief protagonist, the detective. Bakhtin, discussing the early crime novellas of Apuleius, proposes that, in these works, “the criminal material itself is not essential ... what matters are the everyday secrets of private life that lay bare human nature – that is, everything that can be only spied and eavesdropped upon” (2017, p. 124). These words could be a perspective on the detective novel which also attempts to portray a range of characters’ perceptions and motives. Again this refers to the balance to be attained between character based detail and the storyline’s momentum. Besides expressing a view on character development which will be examined in Chapter Three of this thesis, Bakhtin here offers a precursor to a discussion concerning the best way of portraying a range of characters’ voices in a multi-focal narrative.

Polyphony, heteroglossia, free indirect discourse and dialogue.

Bakhtin asserts that the dynamic relationship between place and characters' actions is one feature which separates the novel from many other art forms. He believes that examining this aspect is "like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young" (2017, p.3). These words helped me form the idea that I wanted to write a novel in the medium of living languages spoken by a variety of characters who interact with a moving, breathing environment. My multi-focal approach called for the depiction of a range of speech patterns. Bakhtin – in his work on dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia – writes that the elevation of hegemonic language in the form of the author's voice, suppresses the use of multiple everyday speech types in fiction. Bakhtin stresses the importance of "the social life of discourse outside the artist's study, discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups" (2017, p. 259). Put another way, an authorial narrator may dominate or push aside the depth and capacity for change in characters' everyday thought and speech patterns thus removing a dimension of realism from the novel. Bakhtin believes that such "individual and tendentious overtones of style, cut off from the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives, inevitably come across as flat and abstract" (2017, p. 259). The polyphonic approach, on the other hand, with its removal of the writer's single vision, allows characters, with their conflicting views, to develop unevenly, as in life. The multi-focal approach, a polyphonic method, is an attempt to capture the varied nature of speech and thought in a social setting. Jahn suggests that, in this case, the reader "becomes a witness rather than the narrator's communicative addressee" (2007, p. 96).

The presence of different character voices within a text, as in multi-focalisation, is covered by Bakhtin's term *heteroglossia*. Linked to this is the idea of hybrid utterances where one character can adopt different speech patterns depending on the context in which they are placed. Robinson (2011, N.P) writes about the effect of a variety of character perspectives within one novel:

In a situation of heteroglossia, the dominant perspective, or one's own perspective, is itself defamiliarized. This happens because it is made visible from the perspectives of others as well as one's own. It ruptures the mythological relationship to language, showing the gap between words and their meanings.

The importance placed on the expression of character standpoints within a novel, and the conflict between them is a form of storytelling which can create a vivid, immediate world. Characters might disagree, lie, persuade, misunderstand, speak with an ulterior motive, express themselves in anger, have their own depicted agendas and stories which may touch only at times on the main narrative thread. Puckett writes that the polyphonic form can rewrite rules and can alter the reader's view of a story, and indeed the world, by intervening in the accepted "conceptual and ideological structure" (2016, p. 159). Hale believes that the form can highlight "new ways for points of view to interrelate" (1998, p. 193). This interrelation, I suggest, must start with the words which the characters express on the page.

Bakhtin's idea of speech patterns where one character can adopt different speaking styles depending on situation or circumstance was an influence on my novel. One of the main challenges of writing *Magphur Past* was the need to capture characters' speech and thought movements as situations and feelings change. For example, Sanjay and Mansoor come from the Magphur streets, but their working lives have removed them from this setting. Sharma must adopt a diplomatic, calm mode of speech when dealing with Gopal and Gupta even though his instincts might tell him otherwise. He is constantly suppressing his anger and guilt. Mansoor moves between measured urbanity when speaking to Rehman but the language of menace is not far away and emerges when he is face to face with Sharma. Doris and Ralph employ speech patterns which are outmoded, indicative of age and of a past relationship with Magphur which called for them to offer help and charity to the natives. They are both capable of gruff, politically incorrect statements as well as brave utterances in the face of death. Surbjit expresses himself in current street language; his talk expresses quick changes of opinion. The image of him running and dodging through the streets is an apt metaphor for his style of speech.

One of the compositional challenges which I set myself in *Magphur Past* was to attempt to maintain each character's recognisable mode of expression when conveying narrative meaning to readers. Chapters where Rhannon, Mansoor and Rehman are alone, sections without direct speech where private thoughts are expressed, are prime examples of how I attempted to meet this challenge. With free indirect discourse, the

narrator's voice merges with the character's voice. Thoughts and feelings are conveyed in a language and tone which identifies an individual character, although third person narration is maintained and indicators such as "she said" or "he thought" are removed. Free indirect discourse is the most appropriate mode for capturing this ever-changing language scenario and became my choice of narrative technique.

Wood comments on the flexibility which free indirect discourse allows the writer, arguing that, when this style is used well, "we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language too. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once" (2008, p.11). Most interestingly, Wood highlights the way in which one word or phrase can take prose away from a narrator's storytelling style into the workings of a character's personal, inner voice. He argues that if a novelist is committed to a character, whether that character is appealing and sympathetic or not, he can effectively "impersonate what he describes" (2008, p. 28). When precise use is made of free indirect discourse, it is as though a character reveals his or her psyche through language and tone. The reader witnesses the uncovering of the recesses of a personality. Moretti calls free indirect discourse a "truly peculiar mix" which leaves "the individual voice a certain amount of freedom, while permeating it with the impersonal stance of the narrator" (2005, p. 82). This style allows characters to examine their own situations and thoughts whilst communicating them to readers. This blend, writes Moretti, results in a narrator who "uses the composed, slightly resigned voice of the well-socialised individual" (2005, p.82). These words guided me towards characters who are self-aware and whose narrative language, in the context of my novel, can make readers vividly conscious of an inner struggle. Zhongwen, echoing Busch's earlier point about the writer maintaining authority over a range of focalisers, writes that the storyteller who wants to reflect reality "must manage to depict his characters with objectivity, and consequently he must strengthen their subjectivity all the more" (1997, p. 781). This is to say that, in a multi-focal text which aims to depict reality, a character's inner and outer voice, as well as their personal perspective, should be indicated. In *Magphur Past*, through the medium of free indirect discourse, I wanted to show a contrast between each character's private thoughts and their public utterances.

I also wanted some of my characters to be aware of this difference and others to come to a realization of feelings hitherto suppressed.

The use of free indirect discourse was a stylistic choice which I constantly questioned as I travelled towards the final version of my novel. I wish to indicate some stages of that developmental journey. The first draft of *Magphur Past* had the corrupt lawyer Rehman as the unreliable narrator, a picaro, who gave his own retrospective account of events from his prison cell. In this early version, he begins the novel thus:

This is a story which comes from the streets of Magphur. It is a story of death and revenge. There is a boy, a hero with a guilty conscience, two old people locked in the past and a young criminal who regained pride. I was in court with these people. I heard their testimonies and I questioned them as I defended my client in the murder trial. Their faces, their words, their personalities, their motives and their actions haunt me now, several years later. As a lawyer, my testimony is well ordered. I'm an Indian man living in my own part of India and I'm going to tell you how I faced my own devils and found redemption.

(p.1)

The tone is declamatory, rhetorical, and gives the impression that the “well ordered” testimony will move characters around the story landscape with the use of a device which runs contrary to the aim of uncovering personality.

Contrast the above with Sanjay Sharma's first view of Ralph Thomas's body. As a first-time writer of detective fiction, my challenge was to find Sharma's inner voice and state of mind. In the scene where Sanjay looks at Ralph Thomas's body in a Magphur alleyway, I have introduced a strong note of insecurity into the detective's examination:

He looked down at the body and sighed. The old man could have been asleep, he looked so peaceful. There had been so many corpses this week – in the river, in the gutter, in the houses - but this was the first European. Tomorrow this story, the murder of a visitor to Magphur, would fill the newspapers so that the death could not become just another statistic. Those running Magphur would demand an enquiry and he would have to give them answers.

This man had been killed quietly. People around here would like the story of the death to remain silent too, unreported. No-one wanted to know. No faces looked out from any of the surrounding windows. Gathering information from witnesses? How often did that happen? Dumb acceptance always slowed his work. He pulled his gaze away from the dark, dried blood and ran his right hand

across his face. Already the sweat was dampening his uniform and it wasn't just the first of the heat. Not much sleep last night. (p. 25)

This is an attempt to find Sharma's mode of expression. My authorial voice has been subdued to help me capture the world-weariness, mixed with the sense of duty, which shapes the detective's thoughts and reactions. He is taking in the details of the murder scene – the silent and professional killing, the peaceful face of the victim – whilst telling the reader that this is one death amongst many and that fear will prevent witnesses coming forward. As for Sharma's voice, his connection with the reader, the intention is to relay information, not just about the body but about his feelings. He is a man who acutely experiences the pressure of his work. The rhetorical questions near the end of the extract are part of the attempt to show Sharma's doubt and to connect reader and character. The detective is resigned, in Moretti's sense of the word, to facing obstacles. He is aware of professional difficulties although less aware, at this stage, of the personal toll which these are taking. The questions in the above extract indicate an internal dialogue, a sign of a struggle with uncertainty.

Then, in the same scene, Sharma gathers his professional instincts and brings his mind into focus:

The pale face, with its slightly open, almost smiling mouth, looked oddly alive as though the end had come suddenly, in the middle of words. The congealed circle of blood in the middle of the dead man's forehead looked ordinary, almost like a jagged *bhindi*. Swift, silent death. A killer who knew his trade. His eyes wandered down the length of the corpse. The arms were spread wide and the legs too were spaced apart as though the dead man had been stretched so that his clothes could be searched more easily. He ran his eyes along the white, crumpled suit with the blue handkerchief in the breast pocket. The scuffed brown brogues were worn and down at heel. The clothes were old fashioned and this would have made the man more noticeable on the tourist trail in Magphur. No sandals, shorts or bright shirt. This steady examination of death calmed him. It was his work. (p. 26)

This is my detective at work right at the beginning of a murder investigation. The extract shows his attempt to lose himself in his work and to push any doubts to one side. Ironically, he can gain some peace by focusing on the results of a violent act. The body is viewed through the detective's eyes so that evidence is catalogued and summarised succinctly. This is a moment when Sharma is at his best at an early stage of the plot. He continues his search for clues in Ralph Thomas's hotel room:

His eyes swept across the third-floor room before beginning to probe for detail. A half empty bottle of Scotch stood on the window sill, a tumbler lay overturned beside it. The armchair had been moved to face the tall window so that the person sitting there could look out over the city as he worked his way through the whisky. The old man had spent his last few hours getting quietly drunk. What had been going through his mind during that time? Had he expected death? (pp. 29 – 30).

Sharma turns his detective's eye on the hotel room. He goes on to notice Thomas's ordinary belongings – shirts, ties, underwear, the electric shaver and the pyjamas – and begins to wonder about the details of a life which has ended. He asks himself what it would be like to stay in a hotel room, something which he has never experienced. This time his questions are linked to the main thrust of the enquiry. Sharma is interested in people and this is his strength. I wanted him to be more than Rehman's one-dimensional "hero with a guilty conscience" as seen in the earlier draft of *Magphur Past*.

I found free indirect discourse particularly useful when a character is concerned with personal issues which affect judgement during an investigation. It was fascinating to write about a detective whose life view is wavering. Late in the plot, when Sharma discovers that Seema has been meeting with his lifelong enemy Mansoor, is a time when his thoughts are in chaos:

Seema with Mansoor! The thought made him sick and the pictures in his mind drove him mad. Seema and Mansoor had never been together, had they? Seema had come to him long ago. Mansoor hadn't stood a chance, this was something he'd always known. Seema hadn't spoken to him about any meetings with Mansoor. If she'd kept such things from him there'd been a lie in the room with them as they sat playing with their daughters. His married life had been a lie! No, no ... think like a policeman and find evidence. All he had were the words of a boy who was out of his mind and he needed more: more information, more time to think. Seema, he must talk to Seema. An image of Surbit lying there came to him. He'd seen the fall and then left without looking back leaving Gupta to take care of any damage. Gupta, always reliable, always sorting things out. The change in him had been good to see and he knew Gupta was his man. Yes. Seema would explain everything and he'd get some peace back. (p. 215)

I have tried to capture Sharma's suffering. His attempts at employing a detective's reasoning skill – his need for "evidence", "information" and his exhortation to "think like a policeman" – battle with the knowledge that, on a personal level, his perspective has been shaken. He is trying to use his professional skills in his personal life. He has been confident of Seema's loyalty, he has felt sure that Seema has accepted his moral superiority over Mansoor, and this has crumbled. His relationship with his assistants, particularly

the “street rat” Surbjit - has become unstable. He has savagely hit Surbjit who, angry with the way he has been used, has sought revenge by bringing the news of Seema’s apparent disloyalty. His thoughts turn to Gupta, who is “always reliable”, without fully knowing how close his colleague has come to betraying him. He has walked the thin dividing line between correct procedure and criminality to do good, atone for his past and get results. His certainty concerning his ability to get the job done has been absolute. He has been aware that his efforts have been dominated by a life-long desire to bring Mansoor to justice by any means and this has lead him to stretch rules. However, he begins to wonder whether he has been blind to many events in his life. The above extract is designed to show that Sharma’s version of reality is crumbling. Again, the author’s overt direction is moved to the background as the reader witnesses a character’s suffering. The introduction of a crisis into Sharma’s thought patterns helped me to find his inner voice. The incomplete sentences mirror his doubts, the introspective phrases reveal his confusion. They also indicate a change in narrative style with free indirect discourse combining with dialogism as Sharma’s internal debate comes to the fore.

Another challenge of writing in the multi-focal form is that the narrative authority is passed between characters. Without due care, an individual story can remove attention from the main plot and from the detective. Terminally ill, Doris Seebold sits in her hotel room pondering her past life whilst knowing that Sharma will return to question her concerning Ralph’s death. She accepts her ordered breakfast and the reader is once again on the receiving end of a distinctive voice:

The opened door revealed the white jacketed hotel porter holding a tray. Toast. Coffee. The breakfast which she’d ordered without thought the night before. The boy was so young. She glanced at his trained, nervous smile before ushering him towards the low coffee table to leave the tray. Today was a day when she might try to eat; she’d need the stamina. To hell with giving a tip, though. Waste of effort and money. She walked stiffly past the open, outstretched hand and heard, with satisfaction, the click of the closing door as the porter left her alone. Falling back into the chair, she began to gather her thoughts. Painkillers, water ... She went through the list whilst her brain was still active. (p. 105)

This is a character who is heavily involved in the murder plot but who, in this extract, has other concerns: her struggle with her illness and, on another level, her strong dislike of tipping - a feeling arising from the

harshness of her own life, her pain and the frugality with money which, we discover in a later conversation with a contemporary, has formed part of her upbringing. The tone is irascible. There is anger as she inwardly rages against the symptoms of her final illness. Throughout this short passage, some personal thoughts range across aspects of the scene: the porter's youth, his nervous smile and outstretched hand, the contents of the tray, satisfaction when he leaves without being rewarded. The passage is designed to make the reader aware of Doris's inner pain as she slumps into the chair; she plans her morning medication before inertia seeps into her brain. The more disjointed prose – "Toast", "Coffee", "The boy was so young", "she might try to eat" – is designed to take the reader towards the character's personal voice and to give the sense that she has concerns which are removed from the issues of the murder plot. There is a sight of her personal dialogue as she shapes her strategy for surviving the day. Moretti pinpoints a feature of free indirect discourse which he calls a "retrospective inflexion" (2005, p. 85). There is the presence of the past tense. The insertion of a character's internal dialogue – involving direct questions as with Sharma, or action planning as with Doris – gives a sense of immediacy and verisimilitude. Doris is beginning to develop her unique vocabulary and view of life in the first of the chapters which is devoted entirely to her.

Doris Seebold emerges as one of the most clearly defined characters in *Magphur Past*. When writing her scenes, particularly the ones in which she appears with Sharma, I wanted her to challenge the detective's power and potency. As we shall see, Mansoor, Gupta, Rajid, Seema, Rhiannon and Surbjit each exert a similar narrative challenge within my strategy of creating an overall image of real life.

On the question of narrative authority, whether it be the writer's voice or the character's voice which is dominant, Bal inserts a debating point concerning the use of direct speech. He asserts that "... the narrator does not relate continually. Whenever direct speech occurs in the text, it is as if the narrator temporarily yields the function to one of the actors" (2017, p. 8). The depiction of a conversation in the middle of a chapter written from a character's perspective was one of the challenges of writing the multi-focal *Magphur Past*. A focaliser, involved in a conversation during his or her own chapter, will hear another's words and interpret them in a particular way. At the same time, those words – in a detective novel where there is

challenge and disagreement – can step outside the focaliser’s perception and challenge his or her world view. Sharma, Gupta and Gopal must all face problematic truths and challenges which are thrust at them during conversations. The focaliser at these times experiences a crisis of control and direct speech is one of the instigating channels for this.

I suggest that the writer also experiences a difficult stage of orchestration by allowing characters an element of freedom to react in a polyphonic narrative. My planning framework for *Magphur Past* had to be altered on several occasions because I found myself drawn towards a character response, during a conversation in Gupta’s case, which was quite different to my original intentions for them; my consideration of personality deepened as I wrote and I was able to think more confidently about possible character reactions. An example of direct speech which offers a turning point comes in Chapter 27, Gupta’s perspective, as Gopal interrupts his research into the Magphur Riots:

“Sergeant, are you really enjoying this?”
 “Sir?”
 “Being in this station, working hard, alone. You were in charge once, weren’t you. Until I moved you down.”
 “Yes, sir.”
 Where was this going? Gopal’s expression said nothing.
 “Ralph Thomas’s murder should have been solved a long time ago. Finished with and put on file. Murder by a couple of gangland thugs, probably, Captain Sharma has a competent record. I expected quicker results. What’s happening?”
 “Sir, we have been looking into ...”
 “This case must be closed, sergeant.” The voice sliced through any reply. Then the words softened. “Now, I’ve seen you at work and I’m impressed. Maybe there has been a ... misjudgement. Come to my office tomorrow morning, forget any other orders that you have. Nine o’clock sharp. There are ways of rewarding good men like you. Now, go home. Goodnight, Sergeant Gupta.”
 He watched Gopal close the door as he left. Sagari would be sitting down to eat with the boys. In the evenings she always changed into the dark blue salwar suit. Like wealthy women. Easy to imagine what she was saying about him. The boys’ respect was slipping away, painfully.
 It had come, the opportunity to get Sharma ... (pp. 185 – 186)

The above conversation between characters, and the description of Gupta’s reaction to the words spoken, was a crisis point in the dialogue between myself and the sergeant. Gupta perceives both threat and promise

in Gopal's words and I wanted to pose a question, to myself and to the character, concerning the direction which he will take. Will he show loyalty to Sharma or will he pursue the hint of a reward which he believes is his due? An image of his splintering home life passes through his mind suggesting the latter choice and, hopefully, adding to the tension. The last line of the extract states that an opportunity for revenge has arrived.

The lines quoted above indicate a stage of the writer/character debate which Bakhtin calls "a zone of potential conversation with the author, in a zone of dialogical contact" (2017, p. 45). In my mind, Gupta, originally, was an assistant who would continue his grudge and this was an essential part of the dynamic between my two detectives. However, the nature of my narrative, with its depiction of a character's inner conflict, afforded me the opportunity and the impetus to change Gupta's planned direction. More will be said later about the developing relationship between Sharma and Gupta, but, at this stage of the plot, my own dialogue with Gupta added to his moral puzzle and took this character's story strand in a different direction. I wanted to leave the reader in suspense concerning Gupta's actions towards Sharma whilst changing my own views about this character's actions.

This interpretation of the writer/character dialogue places the work of Friedman and Busch, referred to at the beginning of this chapter, in a different light. Friedman suggests that each character has a space, an area for personal and developmental thoughts. I suggest that such a space can be created by the writer's dialogue with each of the novel's focalisers. My view of the relationship between writer and character poses the additional idea that this dialogue is particularly ongoing during the composition of a multi-focal text which is designed using free indirect discourse. By means of the creative dialogue with the author, each character, in this context, can pass through many changes concerning perception of people, place and time. Managing this change in my chosen narrative style was a major compositional feature during the writing of my novel.

An effect of this dynamic between writer and character, with its constant potential to effect change, results in the potential, I propose, for the added involvement of the reader in my chosen style of multi-focal storytelling process. Readers can do more than, in Busch's terms, select the voice with which they agree,

they become active in the ebb and flow of the characters' struggles, interactions and emotions. They can become character confidantes and participants in several storylines. They have the opportunity to become more than the "witness" mentioned by Jahn. I argue that, when faced with free indirect discourse, the reader can become more of a textual detective, plotting a way through a range of perspectives, and interpretations of perspectives, than when faced with a clearly directed, linear detective plot. A larger number of focalisers, of course, provides a greater challenge for the reader in this context.

Apart from the resonance of the writer/character dialogue and its potential for involving the reader, in *Magphur Past* there was the mechanical consideration about how much space to devote to words spoken by characters other than the focaliser. My concern with the depiction of dialogue between characters in my multi-focal text was one of, once more, maintaining pace. The dialogue in the novel is chiefly between the main characters. There are few conversations involving those on the plot's periphery. The words exchanged by Ralph and Surbjit during their tour in Chapter Three and those spoken by Sharma and Gupta at the murder scene are kept as brief as possible and this sets the format of the novel's dialogue. Even when Mansoor exchanges pleasantries with Rehman, in Chapter Nine, and with Gopal, in Chapter Twenty-Nine, there is an agenda which is maintained. In Chapter Six, as Sharma drives home after conducting interviews, recalled conversations are kept short and apposite as they are filtered through the narrative device of professional recall.

This attempt at plot pacing set its own issues concerning character development. My approach to creating conversation was a demanding exercise in, firstly, capturing a character's intended mode of speech and, secondly, arranging the text so that the speaker could share private thoughts with the readers whilst making, sometimes contrasting public utterances. Then there was the question of whether the character was at a stage to examine this contrast, to inwardly debate and assimilate it. My novel's depicted dialogue does not proceed for long before passages of a character's personal reactions intervene and such deliberations provide the driving force and the indicator of their development. Nearer the end of *Magphur Past*, as my characters reach a higher stage of self awareness, there is more of a match between their private thoughts and their

public utterances; Sharma reasons his way out of the depths of his suspicion and is able to speak rationally to Seema in Chapter Thirty-Nine and is able to offer her the choice of going with him to meet Mansoor at the police station. The challenge for narrative balance, and for character development, is to maintain a fluent, readable blend of these two areas: internal and external dialogue.

There should be caution regarding this concern with forms of dialogue: between characters, between character and writer and also between character and reader. For example, Zhongwen discusses the way in which Bakhtin extols the virtues of Dostoevsky's use of polyphony and picks out the critic's assumption that Dostoevsky's greatest writing undertakes a psychological examination of his characters by building his prose around a variety of voices and around the styles of dialogue mentioned above. Zhongwen asserts that dialogues involving characters, the writer and the reader, did not constitute Dostoevsky's only storytelling tool, but there is an emphasis on narrative description as well. This part of the discussion concerning the challenges of writing in the multi-focal form reminds me that, in *Magphur Past*, the style and the extent of my own descriptions of landscape and surroundings are shaped, not only by the focalisers' natures and viewpoints, but by the genre's demand that I move on with the detective's investigation. I sometimes had to temper the more vivid areas of my memory and imagination regarding sights in order to maintain the reader's sight of the investigative thread.

It is worth noting at this point that, although the plot structure of *Magphur Past* was initially planned, the sequence of focalised chapters was decided at the time of the writing process alongside the creative dialogue with each of my characters. The pattern of their lives, their moral struggles, and the format of *Magphur*, as indicated earlier, were always in my mind as shaping agents. These were the elements which helped me to change a character's course of action and to restructure some events and scenes. I wanted my characters to appear unpredictable. There is, of course, a genre format for detective fiction, based on character types, which would seem to militate against personality development of the type I have suggested in this section. I will discuss the apparent conflict which this creates in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Multi-focalisation and free indirect discourse in detective fiction.

Multi-focalisation has been used successfully in detective fiction in various innovative, experimental formats. For example, Elly Griffiths' Ruth Galloway novels present a linear plot with eight main characters picking up the story in turn, each one showing a different perspective on events and on the relationships between the people whose lives are affected by an investigation. Griffiths chooses to write in the present tense, third person mode which gives an urgency to each character's perspective. A different use of a focal shift is presented in the Hebridean Trilogy by Peter Mays – *The Blackhouse* (2011), *The Lewis Man* (2012) and *The Chessmen* (2013). In all these novels, the narrative moves away from the third person perspective, used to describe Inspector Fin Macleod's actions, into the detective's first person, non-chronological, retrospective accounts. These shape the reader's judgement concerning the current thread of a murder investigation. In *The Blackhouse*, Fin returns to his home island of Lewis to investigate the murder of an important figure from his past; he retells sections of his former life by addressing the reader directly, capturing the tone of a younger person. Of his youthful experience of tedious private tuition, he remembers, "a crack in the windowpane, seen during stolen glances to that other world out there, and the smell of stale pipe smoke ..." (2011, p. 79 - 80). We learn of his experiences hunting *guga*, when he worked alongside a future murderer, and, moving further back in time, Fin tells us of his parents' death in a car crash, an event which shapes his attitude to life and people. Each account, from the developing perspective of a young Fin, provides an intriguing slant on the multi-focal view with a variety of insights provided by one central character. As Mullan asks, "if we have access to a character's thoughts at one time, why not another?" (2006, p.67). May maintains his experimentation with the multi-focal form in *The Lewis Man*. He moves the focus away from Fin to a man who will become a main murder suspect. This character speaks to the reader in a voice ravaged by Alzheimers – a first person narration which is unreliable and misleading concerning important events. Such a distorted perspective is unsettling.

In *A Darker Domain* (2009), Val McDermid constantly moves her plot to different eras and also across a range of characters. Inspector Karen Pirie attempts to unravel events surrounding two crimes, a kidnap and a

murder, which occurred twenty five years ago. Each character gives a modern day perspective on aspects relating to the enquiry before McDermid takes the reader back to the seventies and the eighties to allow the same character to shed light on time leading up to the crime. In some cases, these voices relating to the past amount to incrimination or confession so that the reader possesses information which the detective has not yet discovered. It is an extraordinary multi-focal, multi-perspectival narrative structure which succeeds because of the authenticity of the characters' emotions and because the pace of the investigation is maintained albeit, at times, at the expense of a clear view of the central detective.

In Kate Rhodes' two Scillonian novels – *Hell Bay* (2018) and *Ruin Beach* (2018) – detective Benesek Kitto interacts with characters and sifts evidence in a first person, present tense style. The reader experiences an investigation alongside the detective. The narrative then shifts to another character's third person perspective which, as with McDermid, gives the reader knowledge which the detective has not arrived at yet. Kate Ellis, in *The Merchant's House* (1998), the first of the detective/archaeologist Wesley Peterson series, provides a range of perspectives and adds the journal entries of a man who died four hundred years before old bones are discovered in his house. Ellis attempts to keep her detective at the forefront of these narrative influences by making Peterson the only member of an ethnic minority on the Tradmouth. His struggle against prejudice attracts the reader's attention. However, the detective's skills become overshadowed by those of Heffernan – the old-fashioned, politically incorrect chief inspector – as well as by flashbacks into a distant past and the reader loses sight of Peterson for a time. I wanted my detective's story to be one amongst many, but I did not want it to be submerged in this way.

Alison Bruce and Ian Rankin, in their novels *The Calling* (2012) and *Black and Blue* (1997) set up a powerful counter force to the detective's perspective by entering the mind of a serial killer with chilling precision. Bruce (2012, p. 258) leaves detective Gary Goodhew's standpoint to show us the mind of Walsh, a serial killer of women, curbing his impatience as he prepares for another murder:

Self-discipline and he were old friends. It meant the strength to abstain from a desire.
It was the opposite of decadence.
It was the rejection of short-term gratification, and the commitment to turn a vision

into reality. It was the determination to see beyond the lies some women told, and to eradicate every ounce of their misplaced self-respect as a punishment for the contempt they'd shown to his own ideals.

Bruce's narrative style encapsulates the psychology, the understated evil of the murderer as he justifies his warped world view with self-righteous, pretentious language. In his version of reality, Walsh has been made to suffer and it is his inner "strength" which has prevented him from becoming a victim and which drives him to fulfil his "vision." Above all, the words used are those we can imagine coming out of the murderer's mouth. The last three lines show his hatred of women with mention of "lies", "misplaced self-respect" and "contempt they'd shown to his own ideals." This is the inner voice of a murderer and the use of free indirect discourse shows us a man completely at ease with manipulative language.

Ian Rankin in *Black and Blue* captures his detective's perspective and this is the narrative position throughout most of the novel. Rebus investigates three crimes: the murder of an oil rig worker, the unsolved crimes of Bible John – a sixties serial killer – and the more recent copycat murders of Johnny Bible. The overburdened world of work, with several cases being investigated at once, is captured and this sometimes blurs the main plot line. However, during the narration, Rankin (1997, p. 193) takes us into the mind of Bible John as he tracks not only Rebus's investigation but also the movements of Johnny Bible whom he calls the "Upstart." The writer makes the ordinary details of the man's life unsettling:

He stood up and examined his face in the mirror. The police had issued a series of photofits, computer generated, ageing the original photofit of Bible John. One of them wasn't a bad likeness, but it was one amongst many. Nobody had so much as looked at him twice; none of his colleagues had remarked on any resemblance. Not even the policeman had seen anything. He rubbed his chin. The bristles showed through red where he hadn't shaved. The house was silent. His wife was elsewhere. He'd married her because it had seemed expedient, one more lie to the profile.

This extract shows a killer who has lived an ordinary life alongside a police enquiry which is now dormant, apart from Rebus's interest. His job, his wife, possibly his appearance, are all aspects of a carefully constructed persona. The cold, clinical prose – particularly when the marriage is mentioned – reveals his world view. Bible John's intermittent appearances in the novel provide a balance to our view of Rebus.

Employing two main focal points, Rankin enters the mind of detective and adversary and shows the reader both. Again, this is the voice of a murderer, more complacent and mocking than Bruce's Walsh, but once more the words ring true. There is the casual, taunting mention of the photofit picture which "wasn't a bad likeness."

Intriguingly, there is another character's perspective, used just once, in *Black and Blue*. This gives us an assistant's view of Rebus. Rankin (1997. pp, 372 – 373) suddenly gives the reader Rebus through the eyes of Jack, a detective assigned to "keep an eye" on his companion but who ends up helping with the murder hunt. Jack is driving a sleeping Rebus towards Glasgow:

He'd often admired John Rebus – and heard him praised by other officers – for his tenacity, the way he worried at a case terrier-style, more often than not tearing it open, spilling out secret motives and hidden bodies. But that same tenacity could be a weakness, blinding him to danger, making him impatient and reckless... He wasn't a terrier now: he was a fighting dog with locking jaws. You just knew that no matter how bloody he got, how much pain there was behind the eyes, the grip was there to the death ...

It is as though Rankin has paused the plot here, whilst Rebus sleeps, so that Jack can give us his view of his boss's character with its weaknesses and strengths. We see his perspective on Rebus's single-minded pursuit of the truth, often not worrying about collateral damage. The last three lines – "fighting dog", "locking jaws", "pain", "death" – indicate the detective's self-destructive nature. The reader can imagine the seasoned Jack speaking these words if asked about Rebus. This is again an inner voice. Rankin has placed this device well for, coming late in the novel, this consolidation of knowledge emphasises Rebus's nature before the reader is taken towards the plot's denouement.

To recap, *Magphur Past* is a multi-focal text which shows several character perspectives. Free indirect discourse is closely allied to multi-focalisation. The extracts from Bruce and Rankin also show free indirect discourse at work and I suggest that this is a technique which complements my style of multi-focalisation. My research concerning this link took me further into Ian Rankin's work. At the opening of *Rather Be The Devil*, Rankin (2017, p. 1) places Rebus, newly retired but still involved in solving cold cases, at dinner with his social and sometimes investigative partner, pathologist Deborah Quant:

“Sorry,” he apologised, taking a sip of red wine. They sold beer here – he had seen the waiters delivering it to a few of the tables – but he was trying to cut down.

A new start – it was why they were dining out in the first place, celebrating a week without cigarettes.

Seven whole days.

A hundred and sixty-eight hours.

(She didn’t need to know about the one he’d begged from a smoker outside an office block three days back. It had made him feel queasy anyway.)

Rankin has stepped into the background and we are more fully in the company of Rebus and his inner voice through the medium of free indirect discourse. We pick up the restaurant scene’s details through the detective’s eyes. The place sells beer, he has seen it being served at the tables. Why has he particularly noticed this? Because he is trying to drink less alcohol, perhaps reluctantly. This is a celebration after a week without smoking. Behind any sense of triumph, there is an insight into his discomfort with the detailing of the time which has dragged since his last cigarette. There are no tags to guide us, we know that these are the thoughts passing through Rebus’s head. The parentheses around the last two lines of the passage – the words in between are like a private voice – make us feel still more that we are confidantes as he tells himself, and us, that his secret smoking and broken vow, which brought him no pleasure, must be kept from Deborah. Rankin shows what Wood calls “a commitment to following the perceptions and thoughts of his or her characters” (2009, p. 31).

There is a strong element of free indirect discourse throughout Rankin’s *Rather Be The Devil*. The way in which this style is incorporated into the authorial voice heightens the reader’s involvement still further. Rankin (2017, p. 177) enters the mind of one of Rebus’s assistants, Detective Inspector Siobhan Clarke. She is called to investigate the possible abduction of a suspect in an assault case. In this extract, personal details are mixed with investigatory ones:

The call had come at 6.30 a.m. hauling Siobhan Clarke from her bed. She pulled on some clothes, dragged a wet brush through her hair and headed for her Astra. The patrol car was parked outside Craw Shand’s house, two uniforms waiting for her. It was just starting to get light and the street lamps were still on, bathing both men in a faint orange glow.

She enters the deserted house:

She hadn't been in the house before, but it didn't look as though it had been trashed, and there was still a TV in the living room. Bottles of booze untouched, too. Upstairs: Shand's bedroom, plus a spare that was being used for storage. No sign of any violence, no ransacking. So what the hell had happened?

At the opening of the extract, we are in the hands of the narrator. Siobhan Clarke is just a name, a foil about which the first-time reader of Rankin would know nothing. Gradually she becomes humanised. Her morning movements are detailed. The words used as she approaches the house could easily be indicative of her own thoughts and views: there is the use of the phrase “two uniforms” – the type of language used by a detective when speaking and thinking about the other branch of the police force. The last line of the first part of the extract could point exactly to Clarke's impression of the early morning scene. However, we are not fully within the character's thoughts yet.

The second part of the extract, as the detective enters the house, shows what could be called investigatory language where the detective's impressions concerning evidence are listed in ways which could easily reflect her thoughts as she stands in a crime scene. In the above extract, there are the short phrases and incomplete sentences as surroundings are surveyed. It is the final line, the question, which takes us more fully into Clarke's thought processes – the sense of puzzlement and frustration – and brings the character to life. We begin to view the empty house through her eyes, with the help of her inner voice, and feel perhaps that we are witnessing her standing there.

Interestingly, Rebus plays one of his most background roles in *Rather Be The Devil*. Yet he is a presence and an influence, in one way or another, on each member of the investigative team; Siobhan Clarke often approaches matters using methods gained from watching Rebus. This was in my mind when I created my detective Sanjay Sharma in *Magphur Past* – a central character who is not always centre stage. Similarly, having researched texts in which free indirect discourse is an element, I wanted to make its use more prominent in my novel.

Finally, there is the crucial position of the detective and the assistant in investigations. Some depictions of this working team have shown intriguing uses of focalisation and free indirect discourse. Stephen Booth

has created a fascinating detective duo in his Peak District novels. Ben Cooper, the main detective, is steeped in the folklore and the atmosphere of the Derbyshire area where he was born and raised. Diane Fry is anxious for life in a city and is a controlled pragmatist. Their approaches to solving crime are opposed. In *The Corpse Bridge* (2015) Booth portrays their contrasting voices, although Cooper's views are the most frequent. At the end of the case, he gives his assistant his view of the findings and we learn that he:

...watched Fry trying to digest the interpretation. He knew it wouldn't fit in with any of her logical constructs. In fact, in Diane Fry's world, motive could be pretty much dispensed with, once you'd collected enough evidence to prove your case. Guilt was important in the criminal justice system, not reasons. The system represented by Fry didn't want to know why people did things. It was much too hard to understand, impossible to write down on a report form. It was too human. Cooper wished he could tell her that one day, when he thought she would understand. (p. 460)

This is a detective's view of his assistant. Cooper's voice decries the lack of humanity in Fry's approach and sees her as a representative of a system characterised by quantifiable results and form filling. Somehow their skills combine to find those responsible for a triple murder. This is an example of a multi-focal text which breaks with many of the traditions of the detection partnership as regards the extent of the contrast between its members. The inner voices of the two protagonists not only show differing thought processes concerning crime, they also hint at a depth of feeling which neither will openly acknowledge. Fry's voice intrigues as she confides in the reader that her "... relationship with Ben Cooper was complicated, but she had to put all that aside. Feelings couldn't come into it. Definitely not" (p. 62).

Elizabeth George has written a truly memorable multi-focal novel in *The Punishment She Deserves* (2019). Her detective partnership, Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers, investigate whether the police verdict of suicide concerning the death of Druitt, a Ludlow church deacon accused of paedophilia, was correct. The reader experiences the viewpoints of most of the characters: Lynley, the alcoholic Detective Inspector Ardery, the rebellious Havers, a range of troubled local students, a dysfunctional family, a corrupt Deputy Chief Constable and her jealous husband. Much narrative realism arises from the way in which George, employing free indirect discourse, inserts a character's first impressions of Lynley and Havers. The reader sees this familiar pairing through new eyes, even during the later stages of the plot, and is

consequently drawn more deeply into the enquiry, perhaps experiencing a suspect's view and feelings as they are questioned. However, some of the character storylines come close to overpowering the main investigation. The structure is saved by the nuanced depiction of the relationship between Lynley and Havers, whose voices become known to us, and this is a partnership which will feature later in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Chapter Two. Magphur: a meeting place for characters' perspectives. The creative dialogue and a sense of place.

Closing my eyes, I let the language and the noise of the market place flow around me. Standing still is not an option and my eyes snap open as the force of bodies pushes me forward through the voices, the smells and the colours.

Jalandhar Diary, 2012.

In *Magphur Past*, place is the medium which draws together character perspectives on a personal level as well as on the thematic basis discussed in Chapter One. We have seen that the city provides a backdrop which aids and illustrates character development in my narrative. Since *Magphur Past* is a detective novel, part of this chapter's discussion must focus on the professional space in which Sanjay Sharma follows his line of enquiry. This involves the police station, as well as the city streets, for the official investigation is also a feature against which to view character viewpoints. A further examination of the concepts of time and space must feature in this part of the thesis. These go beyond the static entities which I discussed in Chapter One but ebb and flow with the characters' altering perspectives.

The interaction between character and place is a complex one. Proulx, in a consideration of her own work, writes that her characters "behave as their landscape makes them behave" (2000, p. 6). Ryan proposes that a depicted place is moulded by "the motives and emotions of characters" (2007, p. 31). She also writes that characters in detective novels "must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world" (2007, p. 29). The perception of space is continually changing during the course of an enquiry. The detective and the assistant may hold opposing interpretations of a crime scene. Witnesses, or detectives, might have differing perceptions of the relationships and the lifestyle in a country house.

Time is also malleable during an investigation. A sequence of events can be altered, in a self-interested testimony, to suit an ulterior motive. There are retrospective accounts false witnesses and alibis. An important chronotopic element often impedes the discovery of the truth as the versions of time confronting the investigator become unreliable. In the context of story composition, there is the version of time and space used by the writer to propel the story and engage the reader, then there is the version of time and space which confronts the detective as alternative truths are presented during an investigation. Bakhtin calls this

important feature of the adventure narrative “the reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence” (2017, p. 100). Bal pinpoints the complex temporality when a story’s “actual” events, for example the crime, exist in the same narrative as a testimony, or as an oft repeated versions of occurrences, delivered after time has passed. She writes that there is, “the time of telling, the time of the events, and the suspense of time when these two do not match up” (2017, p. 67). This mismatch can give rise to reader involvement, highlighted in the last chapter, when the reader may recognise when a character who is a focaliser is telling untruths and question his or her thought processes.

This idea of a shifting chronotope can be taken further. In her discussion of time and space, and the altering nature of narrative, Bridgeman writes that space in nineteenth century realist novels was “concrete and stable” whereas in modern fiction it is “filtered, like time, through the perceptions of protagonists” and “the idea of a world is itself destabilized and different spaces multiply and merge” (2007, p. 56). Bal writes that stories can still delineate space, “one space will be the other’s opposite. A person travelling, for instance, from a negative space to a positive space or vice versa” (2017, p. 127). However, the writer may also choose the approach, as Bal reminds us, where “focalisers, in the story, are the agents for perception and interpretation” (2017, p. 10). This suggests the multiplicity of the viewpoints and motives which are brought together by place. Delving more deeply into *Magphur*, it moves away from a space of simple contrast, an unchanging pattern on which to base a story, and becomes a depiction of spreading development, survival and ambition – concepts which change continually. Then come all the fluctuating moods and motives of its inhabitants, the story’s characters. These elements create a defamiliarizing *syuzhet* and indicate a type of many sided life, a rich mixture of perceptions, which, I argue, multi-focalisation is best equipped to depict.

The city and the creative dialogue.

It would be very easy to see ambition as the main motivational force shared by many of my characters as they work to shape their lives in changing *Magphur*. However, their approaches to life have several aspects. There are the cramped living conditions in which *Surbjit* and *Sashi* live, there is the frequent mention of

beggars, the massive programme of construction work, the tourist trade and the wealthier business community. In each of these areas people are concerned as much with the mundanities of life – moving through crowds, avoiding traffic, meeting others – as they are with career progress or wealth. Mahmutović, when discussing the phenomenon of the city which seeks to become global, writes that the “dysfunctional city has to become functional in order to become a global city, but its functionality develops from its inhabitants’ ways of coping with its dysfunctionality rather than proper planning” (2017, NP). In the context of a multi-focal text, this is to say that each character will view their place through the prism of their own life’s demands and these have to be continually adapted. Mahmutović, in his article on Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), a novel about upward mobility in Lahore written in the narrative style of a self-help book, advocates “a more thorough use of interdisciplinary theory and methodology to refresh the ways we have been reading settings in literature” (2017, NP).

I believe that the use of multi-focalisation can be central to the creation and the understanding of a setting. Its aim is to show the living, breathing elements of a place. A view of setting will arrive through the writer’s close questioning and tracking of characters’ perceptions of themselves in their surroundings. The concept of dysfunctionality, and characters’ methods of coping with it, is key. I suggest that areas to consider when seeking to depict a character’s perception of, and relationship with, place are as follows: their position in the social structure of their surroundings, the quality of their relationships with the people around them, their motives for wanting survival or success, the extent to which they are able to consider the course of actions they will take. These points form the basis of the writer/character creative dialogue.

A multi-focal detective novel, with its main thread of enquiry and mystery amidst a range of developing characters, is an apt landscape for this questioning and tracking process. Remember that a character’s relationship with a place can be reactive. This is the case with Gupta, as we have seen. At the beginning of the writing process I had to consider the best methodology to use to link character and place, amongst varying versions and perceptions of time, in the type of shape shifting narrative which has been mooted so far. In Chapter One, I indicated that each character adds to the reader’s mind map of Magphur from their

own unique viewpoint but I did not discuss, at that early stage, the full extent to which character perceptions can change. I want to look at the narrative mechanics of how the writer/character creative/dialogue works in a multi-focal novel with Magphur as a background.

The nature of the writer/character dialogue needs special consideration as it is unique to each novel and particularly important to the composition of a multi-focal narrative. Throughout the writing process of creating perceptions of a place, many of my characters passed through the filter of my four points for the writer/character dialogue and I wish to discuss these below.

Where the Magphur social structure is concerned, I tried to create a clear image of a hierarchy defined by wealth. Surbjit and Sashi are at the poorer end of the scale, although they have the resourcefulness to aspire. Sharma, Gupta and Gopal have reached a higher social level by virtue of their police status. Their partners – Seema, Sagari and Jaswinder – share their husbands positions; in fact, they provide the driving force and the influence behind any achievement and ambition. Mansoor and Rehman are at the top of the aspirational ladder in terms of the new Magphur. My questions to all these characters concerned the nature of the power they seek, vicariously or otherwise, to maintain or improve their social positions. Are they concerned with wealth, respect or peace of mind?

As for the quality of relationships in my novel, this was the most challenging concept to capture amidst a wealth of perceptions. This area exerted great influence on the characters' journey through the plot and on their development. Surbjit was once close to Manish and his relationship with his parents is stable and supportive. His perception of Sharma soars, then sours before reaching a state of equilibrium. Sashi hints at dark issues in his home life and, of course, he betrays Sharma for personal gain. Gupta too dices with disloyalty towards Sharma before finding a purpose. Sharma loves his family but puts the quality of this at risk. Seema does the same through her interest in Mansoor's lifestyle and presence. What does she truly think of her home life? Can she honestly describe her feelings towards Sanjay and Mansoor? Gopal, despite his high status, is used by Jaswinder and Mansoor to enhance their positions. At what point does he begin to lose control of his world view? Mansoor and Rehman operate alone, but we see their emotions towards

Seema and Manisha respectively. Do they feel something is missing from their lives? Do these relationships show suppressed humanity? The relationship between Doris and Ralph, despite a past blighted by violence and desertion, represents a type of love story. Does Ralph regret his past actions towards Doris? What would they say to each other as old people?

The third area, concerning motive, calls for particularly probing questions to be asked of my characters. For Surbjit and Sashi the acquisition of money to ensure survival forms success and they put themselves in areas of danger, pushing aside some of their principles, for profit. Gupta wants the return of his prestige and finds pride during his story. Sharma wants to cast away the demons of his youth by bringing down Mansoor. Mansoor not only desires wealth, he seeks respect. Seema is torn by a wish for a stable home and the need for a life change. Ralph and Doris want to recapture moments in their past. Rhiannon wants to attain a closer understanding of Rajid and she needs freedom. Questions here involved the extent to which characters are prepared to compromise principles. Is Surbjit right to lose sight of his commitment to Manish's memory? Why does Seema see Mansoor so often: fascination, underlying discontent with Sanjay or the need to protect her husband?

The extent of character consideration concerning future actions was central to the plotting of my novel. The portrayal of this area takes the writer and the reader ever deeper into each character's thought processes. As we have seen, Gupta considers his next moves at important points in the murder enquiry. Will he work openly with Sharma or pursue his own agenda? Surbjit goes through similar thought processes whilst watching for Mansoor as does Seema in her home. Rhiannon also has time for deliberation concerning Rajid whilst she is in her hotel room. Does she have the strength to break Rajid's hold over her? Gopal, Mansoor and Rehman can sit in comfort and consider their futures. Does Mansoor love Seema or is he using her as a way to gain revenge on Sharma? Gopal and Rehman contemplate leaving Mansoor's influence and consider ways of doing so without finding answers. It is Sharma who must operate instinctively in the thick of his mental turmoil. Has he treated Surbjit recklessly? Has he neglected Seema? Should he pursue Mansoor at the expense of personal and professional peace?

Character perceptions of Magphur.

The second phase of this focus on the narrative mechanics of a multi-focal narrative involves a much closer examination of place as it appears in the text of *Magphur Past*. We have seen that the characters' views of the city change and adapt. To make this fact stand out I want to show the choices which confront them. The reader first encounters Magphur with the line, "The surroundings change – flowing, colours crossing and mixing like a wild bhangra dance – from temples, sunlit crowds and market stalls to the dark, empty labyrinth of the old city" (p. 1). In my multi-focal narrative, these words do not come from the mouth or the mind of a character. The hetero-diegetic narrator provides a view which is an interpretation of Sharma's intimate perspective and also one which sets the tone for the presentation of Magphur before the reader. The city is a place of light, dark and shades in between. This opening begins to paint the backdrop against which a range of personalities, and their lives, will be viewed.

The first sight of Surbjit places him firmly in the "wild bhangra dance" of the market place. We learn that the "noises, the voices and the vehicle horns, wrapped themselves around him." This place is his element for he "understood its ways, its pleasures and its dangers" (p. 3). Surbjit's pleasure involves making money on the stall, but this enjoyment does not prevent him from being aware of the ever present danger of the gangs. Within this setting he looks for opportunity, for fallen wallets or money and this is when his own voice emerges strongly when he says, "Nothing wrong with helping your family if good fortune came your way" (p. 4). Then the city darkens and Surbjit shows us "the ragged ones" who are "crawling around spaces looking for scraps" (p. 5). Surbjit's perspective introduces us to survival amidst the pleasures and the dangers of the Magphur streets and, in the first chapter, begins to establish the atmosphere of the old part of the city. He will work honestly, but will involve himself in petty crime if he needs to.

After the embittering experience of Manish's death, he carries this view into new Magphur. Whilst witnessing a policeman beating a young pickpocket, he remarks that, "No matter how much the police swung their lathis, there would soon be more thievery here. Not everyone had the money to live in those glass towers ..." (p. 148). Watching the glinting windows of the apartment blocks, waiting for Mansoor in

Chapter 22, he has time to ponder his surroundings and realises that this part of the city is not where he belongs. The shops, “were not like market stalls. They shut out the sunlight. Everything here was bigger, like on the movies he used to enjoy when Manish was with him” (p. 147). Unease is mixed with grief, Manish is never far from his thoughts in this strange place. He remembers standing by his father witnessing the new building work, “watching the lights moving in the darkness. Manish had been there too. Now the scaffolding disappeared into the dust as the world changed” (p. 148). There are similarities between Manish’s final view of a nightmarish Magphur and Surbjit’s perception in this part of the plot. Then there is the meeting with Mansoor in the apartment and the sight of the man’s “nightmare face, one which made you want to move towards it” (p. 153). This sums up Surbjit’s mixture of revulsion and fascination with new Magphur. In Chapter 25, Mansoor’s home, with its view of the city, grips his attention:

The floor was soft beneath his sandaled feet. The wall-wide window looked out over Magphur with the sun touched buildings rising from the dust like the pictures in shop magazines. The furniture looked square and far apart. You had to walk many steps before sitting down. (p. 169)

Surbjit contrasts this with his own cramped living conditions as Mansoor tells him that meeting people from the street “reminds me of how far I’ve come” (p. 70). New Magphur offers him a more detailed insight into the devious world of adults. This setting also arouses in him the temptation to put away thoughts of revenging Manish to make money from people like Mansoor. Despite his return to work in the old town on the stall, his moral scales have been tilted during his dialogue, a medium for character development and change, with Mansoor in the high, sunlit apartment. Mansoor begins to tempt him with the words, “Stay close, Surbjit, I’ll be watching for you. There’ll always be work ... and easy money” (p.172). I want Surbjit’s choices and actions to come under closer scrutiny from this point as he changes from being someone with a keen sense of family to a person who sees Magphur, old and new, as a place for the functional acquisition of wealth. His changing opinion of Sharma is the main path of this journey and the city provides the landscape.

We have seen Sashi's practical view of the city. There is little description, mainly anger at the traffic and at the precarious state of his career. Sashi too scans for danger amongst "the passing motorbikes and the yellow roofed tuk-tuks" (p. 9). Sashi's perception of Magphur is less one of landmarks and more one of customers who will, hopefully, pay him. He has seen Doris "swearing at the dust" (p. 11) and views her as someone who will not add to his earnings with a tip. His view of Rhiannon is much more detailed as she arranges her "rich, red hair..." as "the sunlight caught it" (p. 11). Saving his more poetic terms for Rhiannon, he sees that her "big, blue eyes drank in Magphur whilst the old lady cast it away" (p. 11). Rajid, staring straight ahead and ignoring Magphur simply "looks like a movie gangster" (p. 12). His first impressions of the characters can be ours as well. Yet, Sashi has a drug problem and his world-view is blemished and unreliable even before he betrays Sharma. His crisis moment comes during his dialogue with Rehman in Chapter 30 when, instead of walking away, he gives still more incriminating evidence concerning the detective. For Sashi, Magphur is a place to make money and, in his drive for this, he loses sight of his interest in people. He drifts out of the plot after a brief conversation with Surbjit in Chapter Thirty-Five to disappear into the Magphur streets. Surbjit is "glad when Sashi had gone" (p. 231).

The first detailed view of Ralph's reaction to Magphur, in Chapter Three, gives us another perception which is shifting and uncertain. In his hotel room, he reflects on Magphur with its "new buildings, new wealth" (p. 16). The dream drags him back to old times, to memories, before he awakes to the present to find that he is viewing the present "through the empty, distorting bottle" (p. 18). He is lost in this new world. During his tour with Surbjit, we view his knowledge of the Magphur of an earlier era. We learn the purpose of the Amraj Palace, we sense the religious diversity as we are told of the varied temples and we glimpse the life-style of the more wealthy. Depth is added to our knowledge of place. Ralph remembers house interiors with "high ceilings and cool, patterned floors" (p. 19). He is shocked when he sees the new cinema and bowling alley. Surbjit is delighted to show his client this version of progress which Ralph sees as distortion. When his hand is damaged by the so called "holy man", a portent of death, he "suddenly felt very alone in a strange country" (p. 22). Magphur now confuses Ralph. Surbjit has taken him on his last, memory filled

journey, a point of closure, so that Ralph realises that his end is near. The two men watching him as they return to the hotel provide another portent, so that by the time he meets his shadowy killers he is resigned to death and he is faced with choosing the most dignified way to die.

The first meeting with Gopal, in Chapter 7, shows a uniquely filtered version of the city. He views Magphur from the vacuum of his office, through the need to thrive and also through his memories of the cold crimes of his past. He would like Magphur to be a version of his workplace, “tidy and organised, no blemishes allowed” (p. 52). His perspective, in which the only descriptions are of people and places from the past, is aligned to personal reputation, position and the maintenance of power. His later conversations with Mansoor and with his wife Jas, in Chapter 36, provide the points at which he is confronted with a choice: to realise and embrace his involvement in corruption, which he has always denied, or to seek help from the influential Jas. He chooses to keep to his own devices without confiding in his wife. She strikes at his core with the words, “You stink of failure. You’d be nothing without me.” (p. 236). Realising that his relationship with Magphur is a sham, and that he is in Mansoor’s thrall, he ends his life.

Gupta, by contrast, is a man at one with the life of ordinary people and he views his own country past in comparison with the living conditions in the Magphur slums. He walks towards Surbjit’s house and thinks of the:

... thousands of such houses in this part of Magphur. He knew that these dwellings were filled to bursting point with people so that children, uncles and cousins had to sleep on the flat roofs. In streets like these he always thought of his young life in the hills of Himachal Pradesh. His family had shared the same floor, the same roof in the summer, but at least there hadn’t been crowds everywhere. He was grateful that he could afford an apartment for his family in one of the newer blocks which were springing up. Something had been achieved. (p. 56)

Gupta is observant, sensitive to the lives of others. His words give the reader another sight of Magphur but these words are tinged with bitterness in the last line. Sights reminiscent of his youth make Gupta question how far he has really come. He feels that his brand of lumbering ambition has been thwarted by Sharma’s arrival. Soon after this scene, Gupta meets his informer to gain evidence which will incriminate Sharma. The clandestine conversation takes place in the “empty, single storey dwelling” which “would soon

be under a new road” (p. 62). The nature of the city’s development takes on a sinister quality here, rather like Gupta’s full intentions towards Sharma. We have seen Gupta’s main moment of choice when Gopal confronts him as he researches the Magphur Riots. The resolving of this choice is set in the new city. Gupta, on the scaffold tower, is at the heart of the spreading development. From above he sees people are “making their way into the malls and offices” (p. 118). His survival of the climb, Pradha’s conspicuous failure and Bal’s evidence brings new hope in the search for the killers and a changed attitude for Gupta whose climb in the unfinished area can be viewed as a rite of passage and a growth in outlook.

Magphur is a place where upward social mobility, and the evidence of it, is a currency. Rehman revels in the trappings of his new office. His legal brain allows him to view the massive building project dispassionately: the constantly changing “spreading networks of girders and concrete slabs,” “the wall which separated the development from the edge of the shanties” (p. 66). Rehman sees slum children break down these barriers every day and he identifies with their persistence which appears a search for “something better” (p. 67). He hopes that the burgeoning city will not completely hide the old town, his former home, from view. There is no “sentiment here. Just that looking down on the packed hovels made him feel even more successful” (pp. 66 – 67). Rehman chooses the path of corruption to maintain his lifestyle even though he is continually promises to remove himself from Mansoor’s clutches. His first musings over the city precede his dialogue with Mansoor at The Mountain View Restaurant where the “view of the distant mountains was becoming hidden by growing buildings” (p. 68). Signs of space and freedom are swiftly being covered. At the end of the meeting, any thoughts Rehman might have about severing ties with Mansoor end when he asks “What do you want me to do?” At this point he knows that he has “accepted the inevitable” (p. 70). This moment has gone although it emerges that he has been planning another escape route. For Rehman, Magphur is a place which gives him riches, fuels his greed for more but it also plagues his conscience.

I wanted to surprise and intrigue the reader with Mansoor’s first thoughts concerning Magphur. Like Rehman, he wallows in the luxury of his new apartment. However, whilst in comfort, he conjures up

memories, not of his route to riches, but of his youth on the Magphur streets running with Sanjay in a place of “darkness and dust” and “mud and ditches” where there was “Fire, blood and people running in fear” (p. 74). He remembers fighting with his friend “to use stored up energy” and “their blood had mingled as they laughed” (p. 74). There is no guilt concerning death caused but there are romantic thoughts of the younger Seema in the market place. Throughout the stages of writing, my dialogue with this character concerned his reasons for meeting with Seema: Is there genuine love for Seema or does he see her as a means of exacting revenge on Sharma? Do her final words strike him emotionally or does he realise that his plan against Sharma has failed? Mansoor appears to have made his life choice but there is a hint of humanity amidst the hate filled rivalry before he dies on the Magphur streets where he once ran.

Seema’s perspective on Magphur is particularly troubled and fascinating to depict. Her views of Magphur are tied to her daily routine in the home and also to a version of the past in which the market place, a dramatic centre of the narrative, is prominent. Her descriptions of Sanjay’s early courtship and her account of his fateful fight with Mansoor take place here. Her words here are tinged with thoughts of romance and heroism. She speaks of the two boys fighting amongst “cooking fires, the aroma of food and dusk shadows” (p. 81). This is a homely, received version of facts. When she thinks of this incident, she hides from her awareness of the violence which underpins Sanjay’s life. In the bedroom with Sanjay, “the savagery of his dreams never surprised her” (p. 80). Her first sight of the successful Mansoor, on the street outside his office block, is not appealing but she cannot “tear her eyes away from him” (p. 211). The time spent in his car, talking and touring the Magphur streets gives her some respite from viewing her husband’s stress:

The comfortable, leather seats, the cool air, the patterns made by the sun reflecting from the high buildings. None of it beautiful, just different and an escape from the nightmares, the worry about Sanjay. Mansoor had leaned towards her with those soft words. Then, with an effort, she’d spoken about Sanjay in her strongest voice. (p. 213).

The new part of the city is vibrant, exciting and she recalls, with guilt, her brief struggle to remember the purpose of her visit: to persuade Mansoor to end the feud with Sanjay. She tells the reader every word of her dialogue with Mansoor as she resists entering his building so that he persuades her towards his car.

Mansoor's lifestyle and presence fascinates her. This is her turning point, her choice. More meetings in the new city follow, her guilt continues and her choice is not resolved until the climax of the novel when she stands alongside Sanjay away from the high buildings. Seema's is perhaps the most complex character perspective. As Todorov writes concerning character standpoint, the reader "may not accept the ethical and aesthetic judgments inherent in the perspective" (1981, p. 37). However, Seema plays her part in the multi-focal narrative's depiction of changing perspectives.

The scenes leading to Manish's death, in Chapter Twelve, bring a more evident joining of old and new Magphur. As he moves, trapped between gang members, to exact punishment on Satpal, the alleyways narrow and he imagines the surrounding "homes flattened, new buildings rising, stage by stage, over the rubble" (p. 85). This is not a hopeful image of change as it precedes Manish's memory of savage beatings and tainted money. The choice he makes, in this soon to be destroyed area of Magphur, is to walk away from the violence. He does this expecting to be punished and so his act is a brave one.

Soon, he wanders into new Magphur, injured, having retreated from the gang. Vainly, he looks for a place to rest in "the working part of the new city, a place where he'd never been" (p. 92). The commercial quarter is different to the market place. The bright lights bring no comfort:

No stalls here. Groups, families, passed through the sliding, automatic doors to buy things from behind glass windows. He looked away quickly, still hoping to lose himself in a place where the light could not reach him. People could see his fear and turned away (p. 92).

In this new, strange place, lying on smooth concrete, thoughts of the past come to Manish. He remembers being "young, running down to the sun filled mud to meet his friends," He thinks of "carrying Surbjit on his shoulders through the market place, making him laugh as he galloped." There is a final contrast as the gang, his former friends, see him and, led by Ashwin and his now deadly smile, move "out of the light and into the darkness" (p. 93). Past and present, old and new mingle here in a way which, I believe, makes the young man's death more poignant.

With the death of Manish, I attempt to quicken the pace of the novel and to darken the tone. My depiction of Magphur and the evocation of some characters' views are themes which become more interlaced with death. As Doris is driven to meet her peers in new Magphur, her illness devouring her, she views the new buildings:

Where the hell was this? Time had passed. The road was clearer and she could see that the landscape had changed. There was space, less traffic, and the lights of tall buildings broke up the darkness. This new city had shimmered distantly in the heat haze during the day, she'd seen it from the hotel and wondered at its strangeness and size. This was a Magphur which she couldn't recognise. All this, risen from the fires and dust of the riots. Like a phoenix. Good God, what a load of poetic crap. Save it for the funeral. (p. 108)

The new city is again full of light. It has "shimmered" during the day, promising much. The image of new life springing from old, however, is dealt with bluntly by Doris. Her view of the passing of time and of death is a defiant one. Further on, Tony's house, standing stubbornly amongst the change, is the stuff of her youth and the atmosphere of the past wraps "itself around her like a familiar blanket" (p. 111). Yet, there is no sentimentality in her view. Doris, of course, has entered the place, in the developing city, where she will die. In Chapter Twenty, her final speeches to Sharma concern the past, her youth in Magphur. These descriptions of the city, its streets and the riots are factual, unemotional and indicative of her character. Her dialogue with Sharma is one where she chooses to reveal all. She has seen a changed world and, like Ralph, she knows that the time to leave it has arrived.

For Rhiannon, Magphur provides an awakening. Her examination of the city from the imprisonment of her hotel room, in Chapter Twenty-Four, keeps her mind alive and away from thoughts of her past life with Rajid. The glimpses she offers of her past with her parents seem full of drudgery. Her London life with Rajid was turning violent. The view of Magphur from her window excites her because it is "Always changing" (p. 159).

On her final, fateful journey to the restaurant with Raj, she tries to assimilate the old town sights – "the stalls, the cool temples" - but we learn that "when this was over, her mind would give her nothing real, only

splashes of colour and snapshots of movement” (p. 163). In her eyes, the new town is “nicer, more in order” and “growing the style which Raj wanted” (p. 163). Raj’s death gives her the impetus to find her own interpretation of Magphur.

Later, wandering the city at night “where nothing was still”, Rhiannon’s impatience for a new beginning is mirrored by the city dwellers’ swift use of newly built offices, “No-one could wait, the space was needed now” (p. 242). The injury of the young man beneath the car’s wheels, together with her desire to make sense of her time with Raj, spurs her to give specific evidence relating to Ralph Thomas’s death during her dialogue with Sharma in Chapter Thirty-Seven. The choice to order her future life is made on the Magphur streets and her conversation with Sharma begins this. As Surbjit shows her the city near the story’s end he sees the new sense of freedom in her face and notes that she wants “to look at the life, to see the people and their ways of doing things” (p. 266). My debate with Rhiannon, concerning her actions towards Rajid, and her other life choices, thoroughly involved me.

Rajid might appear, at first, as the only character whose view of the city is constant. For him, Magphur is a place for finding any means to make and flaunt money. There are no chapters written from Rajid’s perspective as I saw him initially as a background villain, a goonda. However, as with the city, an image of him grows through the other characters’ perceptions. Rhiannon gives us a retrospective glimpse of her deteriorating life with him in London. As a British Indian in Magphur he is caught between two cultures, evident in his speech patterns, but is anxious to belong in the spreading, new city. His confident façade hides fear. In Chapter Five, Rhiannon tells us that, when he is with his business associates, he is “loud, in everyone’s face” (p. 35). Yet, as the murder enquiry begins, he can say to her, “I tell you what girl, I’m bloody well scared too. But, listen, the trick is not to show it ... ever” (p. 37). Like Magphur, Rajid’s moods move between light and dark. Again like the city, he is attempting to move from dysfunctionality towards a state of comfortable prosperity. Sharma sees the core of his character at their first meeting, in the same way as he knows the Magphur streets. On Rajid’s final journey with Rhiannon, he appears at one with the city so that she is able to briefly see again the man who once made her laugh. As Rajid leaves the restaurant to go to

his death - happy, expecting money, not realising that he has lost Rhiannon - we know that he has chosen his path and that it is the wrong one. This character's relationship with the city is not intimate, or emotional, but he is there to symbolise the vacuity and the superficiality which could come to characterise Magphur. For this reason he is observed by other characters rather than joining them in offering the reader his perceptions.

Sharma's inner struggle is brought into sharp focus as he works in old and new Magphur. We have already seen his entry to the story as he stands over Ralph Thomas's body. We have seen the stress his hard work causes him. A different view of his discomfort is seen when his thoughts are linked to place. His mind leaves the murder scene to dwell on the nearby alleyways where he ran as a young criminal, "the place of the wild, whooping runs of his youth" (p. 25). He pushes such thoughts away to dwell on his police training. A sense of a life in conflict is established early in the novel. Sharma's criminal links draw him in so that he moves readily into the underworld shadows to meet with his informer, Jagdish, amongst "peeling walls and boarded windows" (p. 46). As he travels home, he gives us a view of the city indicating that the past is not so easily covered:

Soon the concrete and the glass of a different Magphur would be everywhere. Plans told of a shining airport which would be many tourists' first sight of the new India. Excitement. New opportunities. He smiled to himself. Not so easy to cover up the past. Mansoor had a big office in the city these days, so an informer had told him, but he knew for sure such a man couldn't change. The car left the tarmac and the journey continued over rough roads which would soon be smooth. The square buildings, the change, creeping into old Magphur like the fingers of a claw, had not touched this area yet. But such thoughts weren't helping the case. (p. 41).

When viewed in context, the tone of this extract is sardonic. There might be a smart, modern façade being developed for Magphur, but the memories linked to the old streets are not so easily covered. Sharma is not impressed by Mansoor's new lifestyle. Rivalry? Jealousy? The image of a claw extending into old Magphur comes from Sharma's mind and, although he is not old, maybe he has doubts about his ability to cope with the pace of change and with a new era in which Mansoor is playing a full part. He spends little time in the new city: there is the discovery of Manish's body in Chapter Sixteen and the meeting in

Mansoor's apartment in Chapter Thirty-Eight. Following Sharma's orders, Gupta is the character who ventures much more often between old and new and reaches a state of self knowledge far before Sharma.

Magphur is a place where Sharma's personal and professional thoughts blend. He grew up on its streets, knows its people and his mind is in step with its rhythms. As he drives home through the old town, the "pushing, weaving chaos" (p. 38), he begins to play through his mind the day's interviews with those who saw Ralph Thomas last:

Questioning Sashi, someone so familiar, had felt unreal. Starting with Patel might have been a better move. He looked jumpy enough to catch off guard. Or perhaps the young wife or the old woman, Doris. There was a lifetime mapped out on that face. Those eyes saw everything, he was sure. Too much thinking. He needed to clear his head, take a break before running through those conversations once more. Rolling down his window, he smelt the night. Traffic fumes, cooking and body odour. So many changes in the city, yet in many ways Magphur remained the same. The temple lights glowed across the car roofs as they had done since he was a boy dodging the traffic, always on the move. Like that smiling Surbjit. He rolled up his window again, closing out the memories. (pp: 38 and 39)

Sharma, surrounded by crowds and traffic, is in one of the few places where he can be alone to think. The changing city is a place of memories and this extract shows how Sharma's current work is entwined with, and often hampered by, his thoughts of the past. As we see when he stands over Ralph Thomas's body, his words show doubts which are often masked by his confident exterior. There is the first indication that he could be turning his thoughts away from a traumatic event. Surbjit has awakened images of his younger self, dodging through the streets before he became respectable. I try to make my descriptions of Magphur, with its maze of streets and dark corners, an intricate reflection of Sharma's complex, often guilt-ridden, thoughts and unresolved choices so evident in the novel's opening dream sequence.

We have seen how Magphur blends the many and various character perspectives of my novel. I want to focus, briefly, on Hamid's depiction of a city in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, mentioned earlier, in which his city performs a similar role. This part of the discussion will bring out the mythic element and tone in my characters' stories and provide a point of contrast with my style of multi-focalisation. Hamid writes his complete text in a fascinating second person, present tense narrative – broken only by short dialogues –

so that his protagonist can move forward and back in time as well as in and out of other characters' minds and perspectives. The main character is a truly omniscient narrator who can reveal the psyches and actions of others. The city, a living entity, binds an array of impressions covering family life and relationships, crime, death and social mobility. The main character looks over its landscape:

Through the window of your office you see your city mutating around you, its zoning and planning restrictions slipping away, deep foundation pits and skeletal building sites occupy land that only a few years ago aerial photography would have shown puffed over with opulent pastry-esque villas. (p. 48)

Hamid's novel contains many such scenes concerning a changing city and others showing a range of characters' interaction with the landscape. The multi-perspectival element is strongly directed. The story's love interest is only ever referred to as "the pretty girl" and, at one point, the narrator knows that, far away from the main action, there is a conversation between the girl and an acquaintance at which he is discussed. He knows also that she "decides against divulging the details of her shared past with you, if for no other reason than that she has not discussed it with anyone before, and after all these years it seems unnatural to start" (p.124). When used with a range of characters, this style becomes a gripping but impersonal form of multiperspectivity with many characters emerging as devices. In *Magphur Past*, I strive for a narrative form in which characters speak for themselves.

Within Hamid's version of reality, there is a thread of the traditional quest. His unnamed, flawed hero is on a quest for wealth in a panoramic, often hostile, environment. This mythic ingredient adds substance and poignancy to a novel which has its roots in a portrayal of everyday reality and humanity. Each of my characters in *Magphur Past* is on a quest for personal wealth, status, peace of mind, revenge or the Magphur Star. My city landscape, with its high towers, labyrinthine alleyways, journeys through dangers from darkness into light, lends itself to the account of a quest. The Star moves in and out of my characters' awareness: Ralph wants to rekindle his past, Gopal hopes to cover his guilt, Mansoor and Rajid need it for prestige, publicity and wealth, Sanjay and Gupta become aware of it as a link between suspects in their murder enquiry. It is also a symbol of a time, a place and a way of life. It is perhaps reminiscent of Vikram

Chandra's device of the Apsara, the figure of the voluptuous dancer which could be said to hint at underlying corruption, in *Kama* his detective story in *Love and Longing in Bombay* (2007). Finally, the Magphur Star is found by building project workers buried beneath new development. There is the implication that this discovery will bring peace and closure. In Chapter Three, I will return to the idea of a mythic thread running through detective fiction.

The workplace in *Magphur Past*.

The mythical connotations of *Magphur Past* serve as a contrast to the aspect of a detective novel which is rooted in reality, the workplace. This environment consists of paperwork, routines, meetings as well as a hierarchy of positions. These are recognisable features of the real world but, in fiction, they occupy their own time/space unit which affects the reader's relationship with the text. One of the main challenges of writing a multi-focal novel was deciding the workplace features which a character sees and which of these he or she relates to the reader. As with the city, each character views this space differently. This is a compositional puzzle involving perspective and a wish to create a sense of a real, functioning place. Bakhtin argues for limited specificity when describing certain features of an adventure story, of which a detective novel is one, by saying that "any concretization ... would fetter the freedom and flexibility of the adventures and limit the absolute power of chance" (2017, p. 100). Tindall believes that writers create a version of reality by "concentrating and intensifying it" (1991, p. 3). Short, keenly observed scenes can leave a lasting impression of reality. Barthes proposes that a writer should suggest reality rather than attempt to recreate it. Detailed description has an aesthetic value but it is the seemingly insignificant details of a narrative which are vital to simulate an essence (*The Reality Effect*, 1968).

Stephen Booth has said of his Peak District novels that the details of the detective's workplace need to be accurate but not too numerous. He reasons that "in the real world, a police investigation is actually quite tedious ... Your characters would spend most of the book sitting in the office doing paperwork, which people don't really want to read about" (The Independent, 10th August 2015). This indicates a highly selective process on the part of the writer or the character.

In Rankin's *Set in Darkness* there is mention of "a Murder Room at St. Leonard's" whilst SOCO's look for "fingerprints and fibres" (2000, pp. 54 and 55). Elsewhere in the novel, Rankin (2000, p. 128) describes Rebus's colleague, Linford, making a circuit of the operations room where he sees:

"... wall charts; staff rotas; crime scene photographs; telephone numbers. Three officers sat quietly at their computers, tapping the latest gen into a database. An investigation like this was all about information, its gathering and cross-referencing. Detection lay in making connections and it could be a painstaking business."

This description is evocative but deliberately vague. Rebus is the focal point of the story. The itemisation of the room's features, there only for the duration of the investigation, is there to provide authenticity. Here, and in other sections of the novel, official teamwork is merely suggested and procedures are not detailed. Such passages provide a backdrop for Rebus to continue his lone enquiry amongst people and streets well known to him; a working method which contrasts with the "painstaking business" of the operations room. In Rankin's novel, systems are personified by a range of faceless characters carrying out routine tasks, the official approach, thus highlighting the individual working methods of the main detective.

Alison Bruce's novels contain multi-focalisation, as discussed in Chapter One, and also indicate a high level of research into police working conditions and routines. The latter is evidenced in her use of montage – glimpses of authentic detail. In *The Backs*, we read about "the forensics report" which "had come by courier in an inch thick reinforced and tamper-proof envelope ... Three different bar codes were lined up beneath the franking" (2014, p. 178). Officialdom is indicated here. *The Calling* has a murder scene encapsulated by mention of "phosphorescent tape" and "figures in sterile overalls" (2012, p. 193). The interview room smells of "cheap disinfectant and a hint of BO" (2012, p. 288). Bruce indicates details of a working environment which build into a substantial picture in the minds of the readers. Such features are genre tropes and their reassuring familiarity, or their association with expertise, helps readers to move through the intricacies of a police enquiry. Bemong and Berghardt, following Bakhtin's theory of time and space in fiction, assert that this is a process of readers building "an aggregate of mental structures" which assists the placing of a text in the "corresponding narrative genre" (2010, p. 12). The varied perspectives of a multi-focal narrative can

rearrange these mental structures and stretch genre boundaries as, once again, each character views the same space differently. I wish to look at the police workplace perspectives of Surbjit, Sharma, Gupta, Gopal and Seema.

The city and a range of characters form my maverick detective's "patch." However, I started my construction of Sharma's working world by considering the police station in which he is based. Booth suggests that a montage approach is effective when creating an official working environment and this is the approach I chose. Surbjit, when searching for his brother Manish, enters the Magphur police station to speak to Sharma, his hero at this point. The workplace confronting him is chaotic:

Then he stood before the police station's open door. Moving through its pool of light, he entered the high, white room feeling very alone. The noise, the sights, wrapped around him straight away. An old man in filthy robes, bent double and supported by a twisted walking stick, was waving his free hand and shouting without stop at a dumb-faced policeman behind the desk. To the left, four men, staring straight ahead, covered in blood and bruises; a fifth, sitting, head down, suddenly sat straight up to show a crooked gash across his forehead. The man tried to stand, but weakness made him fall to the bench again. A group, gang age, stood in front of two policemen, shouting, swearing. The biggest policeman suddenly swung a long, white *lathi* and hit the loudest one hard on the shoulder. The crack made the noise stop for several seconds before it picked up again. A man and a woman – pale skinned with expensive, western clothes – stood in the middle of the room, close together, trying to shut out everything. The type of people who could pay him to show them Magphur. The woman held a handkerchief to her nose.

"Ruko!"

(p. 102)

This is Surbjit's view of the workings of the police station. Although the sights, sounds and smells form an extension of the Magphur streets, with which he is familiar, he feels fear at entering an environment in which he is not at ease. Policemen have viewed him with suspicion in the past. The description is deliberately brutal, showing not just the unpleasantness which confronts Surbjit but the wave of crime which makes Ralph Thomas's death just another incident for Sharma. The "dumb-faced policeman", turning a deaf ear to the old man's shouts, contrasts with his *lathi* wielding colleague who briefly silences the protesting youths. Calm exists alongside chaos. In the middle of all this, the couple in "expensive western clothes" stand confused and troubled. Surbjit's attuned eye notices these people. Even in such a setting he continues

his trade of picking out potential paying customers. I had European tourists in mind here, perhaps making the reader think of Doris and Ralph in their youth. This is Sharma's working space seen through Surbjit's eyes. The boy has not had his view soured yet by a growing distrust of the detective. Surbjit hears Sharma's voice above the crowd as he calls for order, "Ruko!", and is impressed by his command of his surroundings. This is the domain in which Sharma has forged his career and personality and where he appears most at ease.

Elsewhere in *Magphur Past*, a working environment is suggested. Sharma and Gupta are familiar with the offices, the interview rooms, the filing cabinets and the laptops. The demands of this area are simply mentioned in passing. In Chapter Twenty-Six, Sharma moves single-mindedly through the police station, "Escaping the crush of the reception area, he walked down the empty corridor past the cells and interview rooms. Shouts, screams came from behind the door on his right. Such sounds never mattered" (p. 176). To Sharma, the case and bringing down Mansoor are the only things that concern him and the fact that he can walk past the unpleasant aspects of the workplace shows his preoccupation. However, the interview room and the reception area, where he has appeared so masterful, are also places for his private doubts. He asks himself why his interrogation of the Patels hadn't been more probing and wonders whether Mansoor has been dominating his thoughts. Most significantly, he berates himself with the question, "Was he a policeman, able to think his way forward, or was he still a street boy simply following his instincts wherever they took him?" (p. 181). This question is central to Sharma's state of mind and it is one which drove my depiction of my detective. It is also a question with which I want the reader to engage.

Gupta's view of the workplace differs greatly from Sharma's perspective. The contrast is encapsulated when Gupta "was sitting at his desk in his cramped room, paperwork spread out before him. His eyes were facing the pages but he saw nothing. Then Sharma was in front of him, dark eyes alive" (p. 60). For Gupta, the police station is a scene of failure. Once in charge, he has seen Sharma usurp his position and, lacking career drive, begins to resort to an underhand plot to harm the detective. However, as Gupta's respect for Sharma grows alongside his own self-regard the station is the scene for his further reawakening. As he

follows lines of enquiry concerning the Magphur Riots he surfs websites of far away places and remembers how Sagari has teased him about his lack of experience and knowledge. Change glimmers with the words, “He’d never left India nor knew anybody who had. But it could be possible one day ...” (p. 182). Police work is suggested by Gupta’s words, “The jotted memories of the old people’s stories, the eye witnesses, were forming a story.” (p. 182). Gupta’s further growth is shown by the fact that he feels able to question the watching Gopal concerning his role in the Magphur Riots. He tells himself that it is “Good to feel like a policeman again” (p. 182). Gupta’s thoughts of harming Sharma begin to recede, but the sergeant may still be undecided on this point.

I wanted to convey the impression that the real working environment is helping Gupta to rediscover and redefine himself. Part of this new ambition is due to Sharma’s management of him. The irony is that Sharma, despite the life that Gupta sees in his eyes, and in contrast to the heroic stance which Surbjit sees at the station, is a man bowing under pressure.

An intriguing view of the working environment comes from Gopal. The corrupt Police Commissioner, sees his office as a hub from which he can control everything, with any career controversy swiftly hidden. He ponders his retirement as he looks at:

the filing cabinets against the whitewashed walls with case details logged alphabetically within labelled drawers, the categorised information on the newly organised database, reports carefully worded to show that he had done his utmost to achieve results in the face of others’ shortcomings. That was the way to leave a career, with nothing unexplained and with no-one speaking badly of him. (p.52)

The above extract shows a view of a working environment which is entirely centred around Gopal’s activities and needs. His main purpose is to ensure that other people will carry the blame for his past malpractice. He believes that he has done everything – including turning the rifles on innocent people years ago – for the good of Magphur and therefore deserves reward rather than censure. I tried to make Sharma’s relationship with Gopal, and the above working order, as tense as possible: the detective knows that Gopal’s system is designed to bring about his downfall if he ever fails, but he is confident that crime will fall if he

sticks to his unorthodox methods. Gupta and Sharma rely very much on creating an effective outward appearance when surrounded by the trappings of the workplace.

The interview room is the scene of the closing confrontation between Sharma and Mansoor. This is a functional place and a genre trope indicates its bleakness with the words “plastic coffee cups were spread on the wooden table” (p. 257). On her furthest foray into Sanjay’s workplace, the savagery is witnessed by Seema and her perspective is placed before the reader. It is a view which is full of fear, for this is the time when the future of her life with Sanjay will be decided. The workplace shows Seema the reality of her life as she is forced to cast aside all thoughts of her past.

I debated whether to make Seema the focaliser of this scene. Her attention is spread between her surroundings, her husband, Mansoor and her own personal feelings. Would the fight have more immediacy with Sharma or Mansoor giving us their thoughts and feelings? Gupta, with his history of resentment towards Sharma, would perhaps have given a keener perspective. However, the nature of Seema’s position means that she is more emotionally involved with both Sharma and Mansoor. Her venture into the reality of her husband’s workplace makes her shock more vivid. Also, making her the viewpoint for the fight contrasts neatly, I believe, with the received, distant version of the first youthful struggle between Seema and Mansoor.

The main difficulty in Chapter Thirty-Nine is making Seema the witness to her husband’s long speech as he relates his discoveries. I remind the reader of her presence with such sentences as, “Mansoor sighed and closed his eyes but she could tell that he was listening” (p. 259). However, I hope her return to the action is made more potent by her previous silence. I hope also that there is drama in her words when she delivers her final emotional body blow to Mansoor, “Every second of my time with you was meant to stop nights like this – to stop you hurting Sanjay in any way” (p. 264). Mansoor is broken and only Seema knows the extent of the truth in her words. It is the raw violence seen in the workplace, far away from the luxuries of new Magphur, which allows Seema to view her life more clearly.

My challenge with the workplace in *Magphur Past* was that of a British writer depicting the unfamiliar environment of an Indian police station. At the start of the writing process my decision was to create a series of glimpses of Sanjay Sharma's workplace: the crowded reception area, the interview room, offices with laptops. This montage is meant to indicate the presence of a procedure, albeit a tempestuous one. However, the tone of these scenes, with order alongside chaos, came to reflect the prevailing atmosphere of Magphur. It is an extension of the fictional city. Like the city, the station is a place where a group of people – Sharma, Gupta and other police colleagues who appear - work hard to survive and succeed when surrounded by intrigue and violence. Seema, Mansoor and Surbjit enter the workplace and show their varying reactions to it. Each of these characters has their own perception of the space. The police station in *Magphur Past* is the place where these perceptions are brought together and emphasised. It is also where, to an extent, characters' conflicts are resolved and world-views are adapted.

Chapter Three. The Detective and the Assistant: a plot driving relationship in a multi-focal narrative.

There are two reasons for discussing the relationship between the detective and his or her assistant at this stage. Firstly, the working connection between the two characters is often a central device of the detective genre. Secondly, the interaction between the two can drive the line of enquiry amidst a range of disparate perspectives which change and develop. The detective and the assistant can hold the plot together. The challenge for the writer of a multi-focal narrative is to enable the reader to keep sight of the investigation when all characters inhabit their own, individual stories.

Most readers of detective fiction have a foundation of ideas concerning the traits of a detective and the assistant gained from television and films. I am going to argue that the most effective detective/assistant relationship is a dynamic one which carries elements of spontaneity and surprise and which can counter conventionality. A multi-focal narrative, as in *Magphur Past*, gives the detective and the assistant opportunities for realising their own personalities and stories, pushing against the boundaries of their roles, whilst carrying out the task of binding disparate elements of plot and investigation. The effective blend of these dual roles is the writer's challenge. It is particularly interesting to view the perspectives of the detective and the assistant on each other. Indeed studying these views can capture the essence of creating a multi-focal narrative. I will consider some famous detective pairings in this light.

There must be some clarification at this stage. Many fictional detectives, for example private investigators, work alone without regular recourse to a single character who consistently gives support to the solving of a crime. However, there are enough law enforcing partnerships which offer an area of study. For consistency, I use the term "assistant" as opposed to "sidekick" or "helper."

Detective fiction: the traditional form and multi-focalisation.

Before closely examining the characters of the detective and the assistant in the context of multi-focalisation, I want to link the classic features of the detective novel to my chosen narrative style. I suggest that multi-focalisation can challenge and extend the conventions of the detective genre. Detective stories are based on conventions. Van Dine (1928) proposes twenty guidelines for the composition of a detective novel.

Amongst these are the requirements that the reader must have an equal opportunity with the detective to solve the crime, stories should be analytical and not too descriptive, the culprit must be determined by logical deduction and the guilty party must be a familiar and notable character. There must be no love interest. Chandler (1950) adds that the story must include identifiable characters in a realistic setting, the plot must be easy to explain after reading and the criminal must be punished but not necessarily by means of the law. Both of these writers emphasise the need for the presence of a technical, analytical puzzle within the story without an over-dependence on emotion. Coincidence, or far fetched events, must be avoided.

T. S. Eliot admired the taut, formal design of the detective novel. Grimstad suggests that Eliot saw Golden Age novels, his major focus, as a means of giving shape to a world blighted by the chaos of war (The New Yorker, February 2nd, 2016). It can be said, though, that Eliot's views on rules governing detective fiction are many sided. In his essay *Sherlock Holmes and His Times*, he presents Poe's *The Murder of Marie Rôget* as the "purest" of detective stories because it depends upon no "human" interest (1929, p. 602). On the other hand, he admires Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), a multi-focal narrative often credited with being the first detective novel, because of its character detail and level of human interest which may have nothing to do with the plot. He does not comment on the credibility stretching, opium induced re-enactment of the Moonstone's theft at the novel's climax. Eliot praises Collins for his "wide gift for drama and fiction" (1929, p. 602). Of Holmes, Eliot writes that there is no "knowledge of the human heart about him." Therefore, "He is not even a very good detective" (1929, p. 605). For Eliot, humanity is missing from this character and so, consequently, is an important element of interest. It is, according to Eliot, Conan Doyle's ability to write dramatically, with Watson as focaliser, which makes Holmes memorable. It is Watson's observations which humanise the detective. Eliot favours human interest in detective fiction without resort to sentimentality saying " ... it is superfluous sentiment that dates a detective story" (1929, p. 604). I believe that there are important elements of viewpoint and humanity in Conan Doyle's writing, particularly in the relationship between Holmes and Watson.

The multi-focal narrative of *The Moonstone* is worth dwelling upon, even though it precedes any formulae for detective fiction. Its testimonies, each told by a different character in turn, manage to be ultimately purposeful whilst indicating so much about its focalisers. A clear image of the steward Gabriel Betteredge emerges from his account of the diamond's loss whilst becoming distracted by stories of a servant-world which, as Blair writes, is filled with "mutual surveillance and with internecine strife" (1993, p. x). His attempts at precision are appealing and the digressions are heart warming when he says, "I am asked to tell the story of the Diamond and, instead of that, I have been telling the story of my own self" (p. 20). Then there is his line, "How hard I try to get on with my statement without stopping by the way, and how badly I succeed" (p. 27). Here is the feature which Eliot favours - a believable character embedded in a detective story who brings a valuable and real voice to a detective story. Even the sentimentality which Betteredge shows towards his employers, Lady Verinder and her daughter Rachel, is part of his character.

There is an intriguing view of the relationship between the detective and the assistant in *The Moonstone*. Betteredge expresses horror at suddenly being cast in the role of assistant to the detective, Sergeant Cuff, "To be held up before my mistress, in my old age, as a sort of deputy-policeman, was, once again, more than my Christianity was strong enough to bear" (p. 158). In his stress, he experiences "detective-fever." Clearly he, like many members of the household, does not hold instinctive respect or awe where the main detective is concerned. Betteredge shows a great awareness of his position as a focaliser/narrator, speaking self-consciously to his readership as though to an audience:

I am forbidden to tell more in this narrative than I knew myself at the time. Or, to put it plainer, I am to keep strictly within the limits of my own experience, and am not to inform you of what other persons told me – for the very sufficient reason that you are to have the information from those other persons themselves at first hand. (p. 178)

There is the strong sense here of an overarching organisation of the testimonial sequence which character focalisers must follow. Each account has its aim. Betteredge speaks of the "other persons" who will resume the story and, throughout this structure, recognisable human characteristics appear. He hands over to Miss Clack who gives religious tracts to others whilst barely concealing her passion for Godfrey Ablewhite and "the heavenly gentleness of his smile" (p. 193). This is not a natural movement between focalisers, as I aim

for in *Magphur Past*, but a tightly arranged one sometimes in the manner of a court enquiry. Nevertheless, throughout this presentation of a range of characters and their foibles, the reader does not lose sight of the search for the Moonstone. Several characters take up the position and the approach of detective when Cuff departs the plot: the lawyer Bruff, Franklin Blake, Betteredge and the opium taking medical assistant, Ezra Jennings. This is a case of an early detective novel showing, firstly, an experimentation with narrative form; secondly, a clear concern with the depiction of each character's approach to life; thirdly, the writer's desire to forge a line of enquiry which threads through a multi-focal plot. *The Moonstone* provides a starting point for this chapter's discussion of levels of multi-focalisation within detective fiction.

There is a clear link between a novel's human interest, or the reader's engagement with the characters, and multi-focalisation. My aim with multi-focalisation is to indicate the reality of my characters' lives without any attempt at romanticising or evoking sympathy. My portrayal of Doris Seebold is an indicator of this approach. Drama arises from the characters' interaction. Multi-focalisation is my method of keeping the human interest dynamic and constantly changing. The challenge, once again, is to develop character as well as drive plot in this chosen narrative form. It is a case of maintaining a view of the demands of the detective novel model, for example the need to depict the realistic solving of a crime, whilst seeking to stretch this same model with the levels of humanity shown. The relationship between the detective and the assistant is central to this process.

The characters of the detective and the assistant are also subject to conventions and these place them in literary tradition. Propp (1928), proposing his grammar of narrative and his thirty-one story functions, lists the hero and the helper amongst his seven character types. Greimas (1966) includes the subject and the helper in his actantial model and, with his three axes of description, indicates ways in which these character types can interact. Malmgren (2010), bringing the studies of Propp and Greimas into contemporary literary theory, blends and extends their work with his study of character stereotypes and structural points of classic detection, hard-boiled detective fiction and the crime novel. His narrative formula again highlights basic character elements in the detective's quest: the Sender, the Subject, the Object, the Helper, the Opponent and

the Receiver. He writes that, following the theme of traditional character types, we can view the detective – the Object - as a Knight Errant, following a quest, and the assistant – or Helper - as the squire. The Sender instigates the quest, the Receiver benefits from the search and the Opponent will attempt to block the Object's every move. When gathering ideas for *Magphur Past*, I regularly imagined storylines told from the perspective of each of these character types.

As I was structuring my plot I became more and more attracted to the idea that the detective and the assistant can be connected to “higher order” quests which concern moral awakenings linked to crime solving. I wanted my characters to learn about themselves, and to share new knowledge with readers, besides being concerned with murder. Their quests are closely linked to their individual perspectives of themselves in *Magphur*.

Before examining the challenge of creating a well defined detective and assistant in a multi-focal narrative, it is worth gathering shared knowledge concerning these two characters. Bradley (2013) has drawn together some genre tropes regarding their depiction. She believes that the detective's essential personality and skill base must remain intact throughout the story whatever the problems faced. The detective is often an outsider prepared to use rules to his or her advantage. There may be a physical, mental or psychological challenge perhaps linked to a past trauma or to an obsession. They have a sense of justice whilst not always seeking to play by the rules – either legal parameters or social ones. They are often prepared to risk life or career to solve the crime. Finally, the detective is often associated with, and at odds with, another character which sets a value system against which he or she is judged: this could be an unsympathetic commanding officer, a jealous colleague or even an assistant. Pursuing the view of the detective as an anti-establishment figure with a sense of justice, Pepper writes that the fictional detective, “moves in and out of subject-positions that both buttress the authority of the state and, at the same time, undermine it from within” (2010, p. 144). This nebulous position, besides indicating that fictional law enforcers are not so easily defined, influenced my creation of Sharma.

Quartey (2014) identifies the features of the detective's assistant as seen in literature. He or she should never be more interesting or complex than the main detective. The assistant must be a reliable confidante there to receive or discuss ideas. Differences of opinion and physical separation may sometimes interrupt the assistant's interaction with the detective but such changes can be useful when alternative views of a crime are needed. There can be disagreements, but one will never seek to humiliate the other as there should be the foundation of respect which will lead the pair through many cases together. Finally, the assistant should share the detective's need or wish to gain justice. It is intriguing to view fictional crime solving partnerships – including the one involving Sharma, Gupta and Surbjit – against the backdrop of the above outlines.

The interaction between detective and assistant is often fascinating. Rowland (2010) provides an initial model of how detective and assistant can provide an insight into each other's character. She emphasises the importance of the outsider detective and the astute assistant, each a powerful individual. Here, the detective sometimes delegates an important aspect of problem solving to his assistant thus introducing an element of autonomy to the conventional device of their togetherness. In these situations, the main character's views, thoughts and schemes are still paramount but the assistant's actions and findings provide a point of insightful comparison with the workings of the detective's mind.

Bradley (2013) links the roles of writer, reader, detective and assistant by indicating a framework which involves all these elements. She suggests that each of these participant groups have their expectations of action and plot brought about by complete familiarity with the conventions of the detective genre. Following on from the work of Propp, Greimas and Malmgren she indicates that the writer and the reader possess a knowledge of structure. She sees the detective novel as metafiction. Pushing this idea further, she proposes that the detective, the assistant and the nemesis also have a keen sense of narrative and of their roles within this framework. By this standard, the detective and the assistant must know how stories work, how plot unravels, and how criminals play their part in propelling the narrative. In turn, criminals know what detectives and their assistants must do in opposition.

The suggestion above is that the writer is continuously aware of the terms of the structure and axes outlined earlier. The novelist can ensure that the detective and the assistant are placed within this framework whilst inserting the idea that these characters are always prepared to push against these confines, to break the rules. As Horsley, referring to Golden Age novelists and their use of established devices, writes, “The challenge was to vary the conventions in ways that were unexpected” (2010. P, 31). Discussing rules for detective fiction, P. D. James expresses fascination at the way in which any formula for the writing of this genre has produced an “extraordinary variety of books and writers” (2009, p. 16).

Agatha Christie certainly plays with conventions in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Poirot enlists the help of the local Doctor Sheppard to help him solve a murder. Sheppard narrates the novel and at the end he is revealed as the murderer. At the height of the enquiry, Sheppard views Poirot and gives the reader his view of the detective who “looked ridiculously full of his own importance. It crossed my mind to wonder whether he was really any good as a detective. Had his big reputation been built up on a series of lucky chances?” (1926, p. 95). Christie adopts a similar conceit in the later *Three Act Tragedy*. Here, throughout much of the murder story, the “detective” appears to be the actor Sir Charles Cartwright and his assistant his friend Satterthwaite. Poirot says of the crime that, “Sir Charles will have solved it. That is essential. I shall have been a little cog in the wheel” (1935, p. 163). Poirot later reveals Sir Charles as the murderer. These two examples of Christie’s work indicate an extraordinary use of the detective/assistant relationship; the writer is playing with the conventions of the detective novel. Eagleton writes that such a device is an example of a genre, “casting a sideways glance at its own processes of construction” (1983, p. 105). Poirot’s words, implying that he will watch matters inevitably unfold, indicate the way in which writers can highlight their characters’ awareness of conventions too. Horsley writes that “Golden Age characters often comment self-consciously on the fictional devices of the novels they inhabit” (2010. P, 31).

I believe that the most effective of these two novels is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in which the murderer is also the focaliser. Todorov calls this narrative device “the most striking among a thousand others” (1981, p. 37). The plot has greater resonance as the reader is being addressed by a killer, especially

in the “Apologia,” the full confession, at the end. We see inside the murderer’s mind and this changes the context and the tone of the whole preceding story. I wanted the reader to view the thought processes of each of my characters and I did not wish to focus on one protagonist.

I have suggested that multi-focalisation and free indirect discourse are extremely useful tools with which the writer can help characters stretch confines, become believable in a representation of the real world and develop in a way which can engage the reader. I want to illustrate this point with reference to some detective/assistant teams.

The detective and the assistant: moving towards multi-focalisation.

Studying the history of the detective novel is to view, firstly, the way in which plots reflect profound societal changes and, secondly, the way in which writers have worked to adapt the relationship between the detective and the assistant amidst such shifting norms. Rowland writes that there are two world views operating in the tradition of detective fiction, “one creates a view of the world as a distant entity, the other as a body of consciousness through feeling” (2010, pp. 117 – 127). Detectives and their assistants may follow observed and tested clues, or they may adopt a more intangible, psychological approaches and pick up details from human nature. Rowland calls these linear and non-linear quests respectively. Horsley suggests that post Second World War writers are “very self-consciously responding to a modern world in which criminality is less easily contained than it was in the world of the country house murder mystery.” (2005, p. 53). She goes on to indicate “the wide range of contemporary issues” which confront the modern detective and the assistant. She draws attention to the shifting backdrop of “class conflict, race, mental illness, paedophilia, abortion, euthanasia, drug addiction and the environment” (2005, p. 54). The multi-focal narrative is concerned with showing characters’ many sided views of themselves in this modern society. Equally, I suggest, the writers in the detective fiction tradition who choose elements of this style are concerned with finding a medium which shows character variety and development. When a detective/assistant relationship is portrayed effectively, it is possible to imagine this team at work amongst life’s pressures.

The novels for consideration here are by Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and by the contemporary novelists Elly Griffiths and Elizabeth George. Their work illustrates the journey from linear investigation, through psychological quests to enquiries rooted in social issues. These novels also track an increase in the use of multi-focalisation.

Holmes and Watson form, at first sight, a conventional detective/assistant relationship. This team readily recalls Bradley's list of a detective's characteristics, quoted earlier. With Holmes there is the eccentricity, the expertise, the psychological challenge and the recourse to unorthodox methods. Watson conforms to Quartey's assistant outline with his reliability and his cleverness which never overshadows the detective's approach. He is an unobtrusive, eloquent chronicler who shows amazement at the incisiveness of Holmes's mind, asks the questions which the reader wants to pose, lends areas of expertise to the investigation and takes direct action in the interests of his friend. He provides a steady framework against which we judge the more unorthodox actions of Sherlock Holmes and, through his eyes, the reader obtains a subjective view of the main detective. Conan Doyle (1892, p. 214) makes Watson an enthusiastic observer of Holmes as this extract from *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* shows:

I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him.

The assistant appreciates all aspects of the detective's personality and communicates these succinctly to the reader. The standpoint shown in this extract is one to which Watson returns even after he has been separated from Holmes either by distance or by occasional disagreement. We should not forget that Holmes and Watson are professional, science-based experts from the same social class. Their views converge on shared cultural grounds. Where their detection skills are concerned, Dauncey writes that these two "draw inductive inferences from material clues so as to reconstruct the past" (2010, p 16). However, Conan Doyle does allow the reader glimpses of differences – in perspective and lifestyle – between Holmes and Watson. Early in *The Sign of Four*, Holmes berates Watson for his depiction of a recent case entitled *A Study in*

Scarlet. In another example of the genre looking at itself, Conan Doyle (1890, p. 65) gives Holmes the words:

Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner ... Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unravelling it.

Watson, the chronicler, confides in the reader that he is annoyed with Holmes and “irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings” (1890. P. 65). Holmes’s criticism appears to indicate a conflict of world-views in this relationship, the functional versus the romantic. Later in *The Sign of Four*, Watson uses observational skills when looking at Mary Morstan, he gives us the details of her clothes, but his eyes are those of an admirer rather than a detective, “... her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic” (p. 67). Watson diverges further from Holmes as his private life becomes stable. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, he tells us that, “My marriage had drifted us away from each other” (1891, p. 117). In *The Sign of Four*, Conan Doyle ushers the reader into a debate about the nature of writing detective stories. Should it follow a formula, or conventions, or should character perspective play a part in driving the plot? He also shows us a detective and an assistant holding different perspectives. Finally, Watson’s main task is to make Holmes the centre of the readers’ attention and so the men’s perceptual contrasts are fleeting.

There is more of a divergence of standpoint in the relationship between Hastings and Poirot. Christie begins their depiction from a foundation of detective novel convention. The Belgian detective is an outsider, a foreigner. He knows that some people will underestimate him because of his studied appearance, his eccentricity, and he takes advantage of this. Hastings is a bastion of Middle England, a reliable former army officer, who provides a view of Poirot’s actions and methods, sometimes providing startling insights. His main strength is his ability to provide exact descriptions of the detective’s investigations. It is as though he is standing behind Poirot at crucial moments.

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920, p. 42), Poirot examines the country house room where Mrs Ingoldisthorpe has been murdered. Raking through the fire's ashes, he finds a piece of paper which he passes to his helper. Hastings narrates:

“Poirot!” I cried. “This is a fragment of a will!”
“Exactly.”
I looked up at him sharply.
“You are not surprised?”
“No,” he said gravely, “I expected it.”
I relinquished the piece of paper, and watched him put it away in his, case, with the same methodical care that he bestowed on everything. My brain was in a whirl. What was this complication of a will? Who had destroyed it? The person who had left the candle grease on the floor? Obviously. But how had anyone gained admission? All the doors had been bolted on the inside.”

The clue on a fragment of paper is a classic feature of detective fiction. It would not be misplaced in the more linear quests of Holmes and Watson. However, we are moved away from a pure focus on physical clues and it is the interplay between detective and assistant which occupies centre stage. Hastings is clearly one step behind Poirot who has realised immediately the importance of the scrap of paper. Indeed, he has foreseen its discovery. This extract does not indicate an underlying common understanding as with Holmes and Watson. The questions streaming through Hastings's brain, which is “in a whirl” during the room investigation, are those which a reader could easily ask. His is the voice of the lay person which perfectly complements and highlights Poirot's incisive awareness. His observational skills are indicated above as he watches Poirot put away the clue “with the same methodical care that he bestowed on everything.” We are seeing a reliable chronicler showing his reaction to a discovery, turning the reader into a witness, cataloguing everything he sees or feels without showing the imaginative insight of his companion. Here the assistant's skills lie outside the sphere of detection even though he has ambitions to be a detective. He brings a human element to the plot.

The impulsiveness of Hastings often comes to the fore. He has insecurities, looks for love and readily falls under the spell of a pretty woman. In *Murder on the Links* (1923, p. 607) Hastings physically restrains Poirot, allowing Bella, his new love and a suspect, to escape. Poirot confronts him:

“*Eh bien!* it comes to this – are you going to work with me or against me, Hastings?”

For a moment or two I did not answer. To break with my old friend gave me great pain. Yet I must definitely range myself against him. Would he ever forgive me, I wondered? He had been strangely calm so far, but I knew him to possess marvellous self-command.

“Poirot,” I said, “I’m sorry. I admit I’ve behaved badly to you over this. But sometimes one has no choice. And in future I must take my own line.”

Here we see Poirot’s controlled calm masking his shock at this confrontation, this abrupt halt to his strong concern with the murder investigation. Then there is Hastings’s pain at the choice which he has made. Within the structure of her detective novel Christie has depicted feelings and inconsistencies within the characters of the detective and his assistant. There are ordinary human emotions on display here and the relationship between the two men feels very real. The views of the detective and the assistant diverge. The above extract shows a narrator who can stand away from the action and observe, albeit with a sense of involvement, but he can also become so emotionally invested in the line of enquiry that his actions can change the direction of the plot. Most importantly, Christie has afforded her readers a brief insight into the differing perspectives of the detective and the assistant and also allowed Hastings to show signs of character development. Although this is not an example of full multi-focalisation, it is a step on the path towards its use in detective fiction.

Dorothy L. Sayers gives us an insight into individual characters’ views behind the conventional structure of a detective novel. Wimsey, her gentleman detective, has two assistants: Bunter, his manservant, and Parker, an official policeman. Sayers is the omniscient storyteller. However, at times she is also an orchestrator of perspectives and settings. In *Clouds of Witness* (1926), Sayers uses the formal transcript of an inquest, references to legal procedures and a diagram of a country house to add authenticity. She also, on occasions, gives us the perspectives of each of the detective’s assistant. Wimsey has recourse to Parker when it comes to official knowledge and to Bunter in cases of unofficial clue hunting. Neither of these assistants is there to overshadow Wimsey but to provide more than one point of comparison to assist the view of the main detective. There is an emotional, but not sentimental, connection between characters which involves the reader. For example, in *Whose Body?* (1923), there are dark references to the wartime traumas which

Wimsey and Bunter have lived through and this forms a mutual respect which outwardly does not break the bounds of a master/servant relationship.

In *Clouds of Witness* (1926), Sayers puts Lord Peter Wimsey in the emotionally ravaging position of having to save his own brother from the gallows. His sister Mary, who was engaged to the victim, has to give evidence which is thoroughly examined. Sayers creates a sense of Wimsey's struggle between duty and loyalty beneath the devices of the detective story. She also gives each of the assistants a perspective on Wimsey, Wimsey's family and on the investigation. Mr Bunter delivers Parker's letter to Lord Peter, who sits alone whilst everyone else is at the police-court proceedings, and muses:

Lady Mary was ill, and nothing could be said about that, and if Peter chose to stay smoking in his pyjamas while his only brother was undergoing public humiliation, that was only what might be expected. Peter took after his mother, How that eccentric strain had got into the family her grace could only guess; the Dowager came of a good Hampshire family, but there was foreign blood at the roots of the family tree. Her own duty was clear, and she would do it.

Lord Peter was awake, and looked rather fagged, as though he had been sleuthing in his sleep, Mr Bunter wrapped him solicitously in an oriental robe, and placed the tray on his knees. (p. 83)

Here we have Bunter's personal view of Lord Wimsey's apparently languid approach to the most traumatic parts of the case. He thinks of the hereditary traits of his employers and speculates on how these could have occurred. Nevertheless, duty is his main concern at this point and, after recognising his master's troubled appearance brought about by "sleuthing," he delivers the letter. In the last paragraph, there is an indication that Bunter fully realises that Wimsey is not as calm, and is certainly more thoughtful, than he appears. Touchingly, he sees to his master's comfort before delivering the letter. Sayers has given us a glimpse of Bunter's perspective in the form of free indirect discourse.

Again in *Clouds of Witness*, Parker sits in comfort to consider the last movements of Denis Cathcart, the murder victim:

Image after image, each rich in suggestions, crowded into his mind ... Here, where so many problems had been unravelled, there was a good fire. Cathcart had been sitting before a fire. Of course, he wanted to think out a problem. When cats sat staring into the fire they were thinking out problems. It was odd he

should not have thought of that before. When the green-eyed cat sat before the fire one sank right down into a sort of rich, black velvety suggestiveness which was most important. It was luxurious to be able to think so lucidly as this, because otherwise it would be a pity to exceed the speed limit – and the black moors were reeling by so fast. But now he had really got the formula he wouldn't forget it again. The connection was just there – close, thick, richly coherent. (pp. 120 – 121)

Parker operates on two levels: as Wimsey's assistant and as a detective in his own right. He likens the twisting, turning investigation to driving fast across "black moors." Now he has the opportunity to consider the case alone, stretching out before the fire like a luxuriating cat. Cathcart had sat in a similar way before he died. Parker is on the point of divining a cause for the crime, a cohesive theory. He is interrupted by Wimsey, but not before the reader has seen into his mind. Again, free indirect discourse is to the fore.

Sayers allows Parker a real point of development as we witness, through his eyes, his first meeting with Lady Mary, Wimsey's sister. Expecting Wimsey to enter with "a facetious greeting...as in a Sherlock Holmes story," instead Parker sees "a tall and beautiful young woman, in an extreme state of nervous agitation, with a halo of golden hair, violet blue eyes and disordered apparel all complete;..." (p. 134). This is an important meeting, for, as a result of this attraction, the usually clear thinking Parker is later thrown into a state of confusion when Lady Mary makes a false confession to the murder.

In this novel, Lord Peter Wimsey is viewed mainly through the eyes of Dorothy L. Sayers. For example, we learn from her that he had taken up detection in the same way as he might have taken "Indian hemp – for its exhilarating properties" (p. 91). Also, "he had not primarily the detective temperament" (p. 91). A picture emerges of a man searching for a purpose and it is his interaction with his assistants which highlights the often hidden clarity of his thoughts. He says to Parker, "The best thing we can do is to look the evidence in the face, however ugly. And I don't mind admittin' that some of it's a positive gargoyle" (p. 122). There is no chronicler in *Clouds of Witness*, but our view of Wimsey, and of the investigation, is formed as the writer allows us to view people and events through the occasional glimpse into the assistants' perspectives.

The contemporary detective novelist Elly Griffiths writes detective novels which are overtly multi-focal. There are eight stock characters who each have their turn on centre stage. Griffiths sets her crimes in a world which is often splintered and dysfunctional behind the appearance of stability. Her plots indicate a world of loneliness, self-absorption, shattering family secrets, unsolved murders with roots in the past and, above all, strained relationships. The fluid movement between perspectives, the narrative never staying long on one scene, enhances the depiction of such a world. The thread which runs through the novels is the fraught, complex relationship between the detective and the assistant.

In Griffiths's Norfolk based series, Ruth Galloway, a forensic archaeologist who divides her time between being part of a police team and university teaching, is often called to investigate alongside Detective Chief Inspector Nelson. Their areas of expertise often complement each other, sometimes they do not. In some plots, their positions technically change. Ruth becomes the expert, for example at the scene of an older and unsolved crime, whilst Nelson follows her lead. In more recent homicide matters, Nelson takes full charge. Their relationship is complicated by their short-lived affair in *The Crossing Places* (2009) after which Ruth becomes pregnant. In subsequent novels, Nelson and his wife Michelle work with Ruth to raise the child, Kate.

In *The House at Sea's End* (2011), Ruth is called to help investigate some bones uncovered on a beach. Hard pressed, she carries Kate with her. Nelson's perspective mixes personal and professional thoughts as he looks at Ruth as she looks closely at the remains with Kate in a baby sling:

She leans over and Nelson looks anxiously at Kate, suspended in her baby sling.
How safe were those things anyway...?

"Any idea how old the bodies are?" he asks.

"I think they're fairly recent," says Ruth. "Bones buried in sand usually disappear after a few hundred years."

Not for the first time, Nelson marvels at what archaeologists consider recent.

"So they could be a hundred years old?"

"I think it's likely they're more modern than that," says Ruth cautiously. "We'll do C14 dating. Also there's hair and teeth. We can do a number of different tests."

Nelson knows from previous cases that C14, or carbon fourteen dating, measures the amount of carbon left within a body. When we die we stop taking in carbon 14 and it starts to break down so, by measuring the C14 left in a bone, archaeologists can estimate its age. He also knows that dates can vary by as much

as a hundred years. This may not seem much to Ruth but its not very helpful when deciding whether or not you're dealing with a recent homicide. (pp. 44 – 45)

Griffiths makes an appeal to a reading audience's connection with science, rather like Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs. As for character perspective in this extract, there is Nelson's gruff, but touching, anxiety about his daughter's safety. He has learned technical details from Ruth's involvement in past cases and he gives a layman's view of the science. We also sense his professional drive to get on with the case to gain a result.

In the same chapter of *The House at Sea's End*, Nelson takes Kate to the shelter of his car arousing the suspicions of colleagues who know nothing about his affair with Ruth. The narrative focus shifts to Ruth and her sense of freedom and anticipation:

She can't wait to get down to the beach and start work on the trench. She wants to assert her authority on the proceedings, to check that the skeleton sheets are properly filled in, that there is no mixing of bones, that everything is securely bagged and labelled. But, more than that, she wants to be involved ... She would not have admitted it, but by the time she looks down at the bodies stretched out back to back in their sandy grave she has almost forgotten she has a baby. (p. 47)

The change of focalisation, from Nelson to Ruth, is swift. There is conflict in the lives of the detective and the assistant. Personal and professional matters collide, but this aspect is dramatic rather than sentimental. Griffiths's approach to her detective and assistant allows these characters to subvert each other's roles. The opinions and arguments of one could, at any time, change the views of the other and change the course of the enquiry. The traditional conventions of their roles are shattered as a result of the situation, and the world, in which they live. The reader's attention is divided between these characters' quest for clues and their search for personal peace. The use of the present tense, common to all the books in the series, makes human issues and approaches to crime vivid and immediate. The inclusion of free indirect discourse in the Ruth Galloway mysteries is minimal and, although the reader comes to know the characters over a number of books, Griffiths's narrative gives the impression of a writer who is an ever present go-between clearly giving readers the information that they need. Nevertheless, her organisation of the

personalities which inhabit her novels is painstaking. Also, character behaviour is consistent and involves the reader in their storylines if not completely in their psyches.

Elly Griffiths - at question and answer sessions which I attended on 8th June, 2019 and 7th February, 2020 – stated that the most difficult part of her craft is blending individual character storylines into the narrative drive towards solving a murder. This matter of focus is one to which I will return in the context of *Magphur Past*.

For the final novel in this discussion of the detective and the assistant in a multi-focal narrative, I wish to return to Elizabeth George's *The Punishment She Deserves* (2019). I have outlined the range of character views in this novel. The detective is the aristocratic Thomas Lynley and his assistant is the down-to-earth Barbara Havers. In the area of their working relationship, the element which holds the storyline together, this is a novel of two halves. In the first half, the rebellious and stubborn Detective Sergeant Havers accompanies the troubled Detective Chief Superintendent Isabelle Ardery to investigate and verify a past verdict of suicide. Havers, an able detective, realises that there has been a miscarriage of justice and refuses to support Ardery in her wish to verify the original report. The dynamic between the senior officer and the assistant becomes strained and Havers reaches the point of being reprimanded and disciplined. Throughout this phase, Havers regularly wonders what Lynley would do or say. He is not beside her, but he is a presence.

In the second half of the book, with Ardery sidelined to confront her own splintered family and her alcoholism, the partnership of Lynley and Havers is renewed and George skilfully evokes, sometimes through the filter of their individual perspectives and sometimes through confrontations, their differing social backgrounds and their respective world-views. The question arises as to whether Ruddock, a local community policeman, strangled Ian Druitt - the curate, arrested for alleged misconduct with young students - with a clerical stole. In a chapter in which Lynley's viewpoint is prominent, George shows some interaction between the urbane, calm Lynley and the impatient Havers:

He and Havers could, Lynley knew, only look at each detail as it came up. They had little enough time and no manpower, so their next move had to be something that shed light. He was listing potential actions in his head as he went down to the breakfast room to meet Havers. She was waiting for him at reception, her expression telling him that a meal was the last thing on her mind.

She said, "Let's haul him in, sir."

"We're not quite there yet," was his reply, and he could see at once that this did not please.

"Sod it. What else do we need? A bloody dagger with his fingerprints on it?"

"That would be helpful," he said. "But we need to speak to the vicar."

"And that would be for what bleeding reason?"

"He'll let us into the vestry."

"And we need to get into the vestry another time for ...?"

"For the assurance that what we think was done actually could be done. At the moment we have nothing but supposition." (pp. 638 – 639)

This is Lynley's voice of reason against Havers's impetuosity, a recurring theme; the main detective's procedural language versus the clipped, coarse and confrontational words of the assistant. Lynley, although understated, knows how to manage his assistant but there is always the danger that she might exceed the boundaries of her role as a supportive device for Lynley as she pursues her own lines of enquiry.

George gives her detective and her assistant their own space at times. At one stage, Havers wanders around Ludlow; her thoughts concern PCSO Ruddock and the truth or otherwise of his story that he was phoning elsewhere in the police station when Ian Druitt killed himself. Is Ruddock the one behaving inappropriately towards students? George gives us Havers's reasoning:

Besides, everyone knew he'd not been in the room with Ian Druitt. He'd said as much and he'd explained what he'd been doing. But if the truth was that he'd been laying some pipe in the back seat of a patrol car, that was a far more serious matter than merely making phone calls to pubs from another office in the building. (p. 212)

Havers is an underrated officer. The above extract begins to show us the thought processes of a tenacious investigator. We also hear her voice. The crude directness of "laying some pipe" shows us Havers's bluff means of expression and, by this stage of the plot, we understand why it grates on the refined Lynley.

There are several occasions in *The Punishment She Deserves* when Lynley has the time and space to mull over the evidence. He knows that Druitt's father will want reasons for the death of his son and neither he nor Havers will be in a position to give answers:

They had an assortment of half-mad evidence that told them it was highly likely and practically assuredly murder, but while what they had might suffice to reassure Clive Druitt that his son had not committed suicide, it did not take them closer to an arrest, a charge, and what Druitt wanted and justice demanded: a prosecution. If he and Havers handed over what they had to the Crown Prosecution Service, the sheer incredulity of any barrister involved would end up shaming both the West Mercia Police who'd allowed this to happen on their patch and the Met ... (p. 638)

Again, George gives us the detective's voice. The considered tone, the measured phrases such as "practically assuredly murder," "suffice to reassure," and "the sheer incredulity," might easily come from Lynley's own mouth. Throughout the novel, George attains a fascinating blend of the authorial voice and each character's own words. This technique is most effective and well placed in her depiction of the detective and the assistant.

As tension and resolution alternate in their working relationship, the essential rapport between detective and assistant beautifully binds the variety of characters and storylines in the novel. It is towards them that the reader looks for a kind of dependability amidst the dysfunctionality. This is particularly so in the second phase of the novel as they are concerned with truth in the midst of police corruption. The pair seem mismatched but they complement each other so that Lynley can reflect that his assistant provokes but "that when it came to her considerations about a case, Barbara Havers could be absolutely trusted" (p. 527). When Lynley makes his first meaningful contribution to the case on page 275 of a novel of seven hundred and sixty pages, he brings a sense of order and shows the ability to maintain his considered approach amidst the storylines.

It should not be forgotten that the character examples shown in this chapter are taken from detective novel series and writers therefore have many opportunities to create and develop personality traits. When

examining the chosen texts in this chapter, and their writers' use of character viewpoint and voice, I found that it is the increased use of focalisation which most effectively makes us see and believe the characters.

In the relationship between Holmes and Watson, the moments of focalisation give readers insights into character, but offer little in the way of character development. Watson guides us through the information which we need. We have seen that Christie allows Hastings his time of "freedom" and development in his confrontation with Poirot. Wimsey, Parker and Bunter are also primarily in the story to detect and, again, there are brief glimpses of character perspective and development particularly concerning Parker. In Elly Griffiths's more fully multi-focal novels, things happen to the eight characters whose viewpoints we see. Their situations change but they display the same character traits throughout the series. Ruth is a strong, independent single mother - with a talent for detection – who harbours secret feelings for Nelson. Nelson is a tough, straight talking policeman who hides his sentimental side behind his professionalism. There is a dynamism, a potential for breaking the rules of a working relationship, as well as the scope for character development, which arises from their relationship even if we cannot view their personalities beyond the writer's signals. George's depiction of Lynley and Havers, on the other hand, contains the real sense that this team may stop functioning at any moment because of the characters' personality traits. Traits which George allows to unfold with her expertly managed focalised style.

The level of George's focalisation can be appreciated fully when viewed against, for example, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe's novels. Here, the detective, Wolfe, and the investigation are viewed entirely through the eyes of the assistant, Archie Goodwin. In the stories *Three at Wolfe's Door* (1961) and *Murder by the Book* (1967), Goodwin interprets his employer's every word, movement and deliberation for the reader. Archie, himself an efficient detective, is well developed in world-view and voice. Wolfe, however, although charismatic at times, fulfils the demands of the detective novel formula, particularly with the pronouncement of his findings at the end, rather than offering insight into a personality.

The detective and the assistants in *Magphur Past*: their perspectives of each other.

I have tried to make my characters in *Magphur Past* move between conventions. For example, Sanjay Sharma's life has been almost equally divided between criminal and legal activities. Although a respectable policeman now, he has been a juvenile criminal and an accessory to murder. Similarly, Gupta is not a traditional, straightforward assistant on the side of law and order because of his grudge against Sharma. Both men wish to lift themselves from humble beginnings. Surbjit, when he assumes the assistant's role, is a free spirit and Sharma recognises part of his own youth in him. The street boy moves in and out of the assistant's role at will. Initially, Gupta hopes that Sharma will fail but later gains respect for him. Surbjit, on the other hand, begins by admiring the detective and then becomes disenchanted with being used. Later, he is deeply angry at Sharma's lack of action concerning the death of his brother. The relationship between the detective and his assistants is highly charged, unstable and not always bound by professional considerations. The creative dialogue with these characters, or the act of deciding the extent to which they should conform to stereotypes, was one of the main driving forces behind the writing of *Magphur Past*. In the final draft, their positions are fluid and their actions are often ruled by emotions rather than the use of reason.

My detective and his assistants view each other during the narrative path of my novel. Creating the characters' capacity to do this was one of the most intriguing and enjoyable aspects of my use of multi-focalisation. Sharma, for example, notices the "flashes of resentment in Gupta's eyes" but there is "also the wisdom which sometimes rumbled from him." Whilst Sharma would find it "difficult to imagine working with anyone else" he knows that "Gupta needed watching." (p. 38). Yet, these are fleeting thoughts. The detective does not perceive the depth of Gupta's personal drama.

This is an early meeting between Sharma and Gupta. Gupta is seething with resentment because Sharma has usurped his position. His wife is adamant that he should act decisively to correct this and harangues him in the home. He is anxious not to lose the respect of his sons. He feels used by Sharma and is dismissive of his superior's obsession with Mansoor. There is no sign of support at this stage:

More dirty work. Sharma saw Mansoor in every crime. Now he was expected to dig for information to give more publicity and more promotion to this jumped up street boy with his film star looks and pressed uniform. Sharma had his own street contacts. Why didn't he use them? No, he'd rather give orders. Sagari had once urged him to look into Sharma's past to see whether the gang leader and the policeman had ever been close. She'd snorted in disgust when he'd turned away. Yet, he had looked into the past. It was true that young Sharma had been a real hell raiser. He certainly would have run the streets at the same time as Mansoor. Quite a change had taken place! There had been rumours that he had used bribes to gain advancement, that he had the support of a someone wealthy. (p. 61)

The tone is negative and there is a concern with finding Sharma's weaknesses. There is frustration at his own professional impotence. He lacks the imagination to know how to proceed either at home or at work; there are questions, but no answers. At this point, his view contrasts with the approach of Surbjit who is completely in Sharma's thrall at the beginning of the murder inquiry. Ryan highlights detective fiction as a genre which can "evoke mental processes as a way to explain the behaviour of characters" (2007, p. 31). I had this view in mind during the novel planning stage when I devoted a great deal of time considering the characters' opinions of themselves. There are few conversations between Sanjay Sharma and Gupta in the novel. Their thoughts and views are internalised and the conversations that exist are functional in the first few chapters but gradually Sharma breaks down Gupta's reticence. The idea of the detective and the assistant holding conflicting life perspectives, which develop and change, intrigued me at the planning stage of *Magphur Past*. Such a feature propels the plot and brings character development into heightened focus. The detective and his assistants undergo drastic changes of outlook and personality. I was anxious to make their relationships dynamic as befitting a multi-focal narrative.

Contrast the view expressed in the above extract with Gupta's perception of his relationship with Sharma later in *Magphur Past*:

Sharma didn't always follow the rules. That was his strength and his weakness. He never seemed to get criticised or caught! Well, he could soon change that. Yet, there was another thing which kept him awake. Something he couldn't work out. Sharma appeared to trust him as though they were a team. He remembered the words which had made him feel so good: "That was good work, Amarjit. I'll tell the commissioner what you've done." These words could have been there to make him obedient. The trust could be an act. If Surbjit could tell what he was

thinking, then Sharma surely could. He'd have to be even more careful. Yet, Sharma did seem to depend on him more than anyone else, came to him more often than before. Something in the man had changed ... (p. 154)

Gupta is here showing a more balanced, considered view of Sharma, one less moulded and blighted by jealousy. His opinion is based on close observation of his superior and there is an increased awareness of the detective's skills, his weaknesses and the reasons for his continuing survival and success. Burgeoning appreciation and respect has not yet grown into trust but the development continues. In his mind, Sharma's growing dependence on him during the murder investigation, his praise and the use of his first name, could be a ploy to gain maximum use from his experience, or to keep his antagonism at bay. Sharma, he senses, can read his negative feelings and his intentions and this makes him uneasy.

Sharma and Surbjit, born and bred in the city, share a speed of thought which enables them to survive in Magphur. Gupta, the country boy, is ill at ease with their quick wits and he is not equipped to keep pace with them. The extract is an indication of Gupta's inner turmoil, his growing guilt at his unprofessionalism, which I wanted to trace. He has opportunities to betray Sharma – once during the secret conversation with his informant and again in Gopal's office. Gupta's perspective, full of questioning and self-doubt, is designed to give added drama to these scenes. A picture emerges of a good man who is driven by resentment to take a wrong course of action which will support the villains and harm Sharma. This is an assistant who spends most of the novel uncertain of his motives and at odds with the detective before fitting into the role of a more traditional assistant later in the novel. Gupta and the reader share a lack of knowledge about Sharma; I wanted Gupta's awareness of Sharma's character to develop at the same pace as the reader's. The power of Gupta's perspective, more so than that of Surbjit or Sharma, is that he analyses his thoughts, feelings and changes in a way which is cohesive. His self-awareness, and his journey to heightened knowledge, are there to be seen and tracked by the reader.

If Gupta travels from disdain to respect where Sharma is concerned, then Surbjit makes the opposite journey. This is the first meeting between Sharma and Surbjit in the reception area of The Park Hotel as the murder investigation begins. Surbjit is viewed through Sharma's perspective:

He looked again at the boy and recognised himself. Something about the youngster took him back to his own schemes for making money from visitors. He had used his smile well ... even when he ran with the gang. Now he looked straight into the boy's face and saw his gaze returned. There was understanding.

The boy's eyes clearly admired his immaculate uniform with its polished buttons. This made him proud for appearance was everything. He saw a boy of about fourteen who looked sharp and alert. The shock of black hair hung over the forehead and almost covered the right eye. The loose fitting clothes were off-white and grimy but they'd been washed many times. The boy had also thought carefully about his look; he was ragged enough to gain sympathy, if needed, but smart enough for tourists not to reject him as a guide. Clever. Yes, there was a story behind the outward show, a story full of quick thoughts and narrow escapes. The youngster had seen trouble and had been troubled. Fate would decide which path he would choose. He'd need life to bring him good luck. (p. 29)

The above extract shows an interesting exercise in focalisation: one character taking in the details of another and, at the same time, observing the reaction which they themselves are eliciting. Sharma recognises elements of his own character and background in Surbjit and details are picked out with an investigator's eye. The first impressions here concern appearance and the use which can be made of this. The detective keeps his uniform immaculate to establish authority and the street boy arranges his clothes to attract customers. Sanjay sees that Surbjit admires his uniform and this pleases him for he is very aware of the social journey he has made. He senses the trouble in Surbjit's life and this brings back memories of his own youth. He hopes that the youngster will choose the right path – he is proud that he has done so – and he wishes him luck, not realising that their paths will soon cross again when he makes Surbjit his assistant and persuades him to spy on Mansoor. The above extract presents Sanjay's view of Surbjit and of the link between them. The words are designed to tell us as much about Sanjay's character and outlook as they do about this connection.

Chapter Fourteen of *Magphur Past* gives us Surbjit's view of Sharma when he still admires the detective. He takes the bold step of entering the police station to enlist his help to look for his wayward brother, Manish:

He was alone with Captain Sharma. They moved to sit on the bench. The man with the broken head had left blood. Then he told his story quickly, getting rid of

some of his worry: Manish was missing for the longest time ever, parents so worried, very afraid that he might be with the bad men, angry on the stall. Please help...

Captain Sharma looked at him, time passed and he managed to hold the gaze. The police station noise told him that Manish missing from home was one small problem amongst many big ones. If Sharma just passed him over to that fat sergeant, he would run back the way he had come. Then the questions began.

“Who are your brother’s friends? Who would he go to see? Do you have names?”

He felt his blood rise to his face, he looked down, feeling shame. The names would be people from his streets, people known to his family, and, here he was, telling the police! Manish had caused a bigger problem than he could know.

“I don’t know his friends ... maybe the gangs ...”

Captain Sharma’s voice was full of kindness.

“Don’t worry, Surbjit. You’ve told me enough. Be brave for your family now. We’ll find Manish.” (p. 103)

The first sentence of this extract, in its simplicity and mention of Sharma’s rank, is designed to show Surbjit’s surprise, maybe disbelief and awe, at being alone with Sharma, a man of great reputation. In an alien environment, associated with arrests and beatings, he closely observes Sharma’s reaction to his garbled story. His feelings about the questions asked of him highlight his shame that Manish is now living such a different life. There is the worry that he is informing on his brother and it is only his admiration for Sharma which makes him speak further. At the end of the extract, Surbjit views Sharma as kind, but this opinion will change.

When Sharma uses him to spy on Mansoor, by telling him that this man could have been responsible for his brother’s death, Surbjit becomes disenchanted with the detective and contemptuous that Seema is linked with the gang leader. Sharma, in his eyes, is less of a hero – less in control and emasculated by his wife’s actions. He is also impressed with Mansoor’s power and wealth and is in danger of moving more fully into the criminal world.

Walk away and let these people live in their own mess. When he was bigger, stronger, then would be the time to revenge Manish. Mansoor was too strong for Sharma. Money and power had turned him into a giant who could buy his way out of any problem. Well, everything was clear to him. Forget Sharma and his wandering wife. He could become Mansoor’s dumb servant for a time, do his jobs, take his money, until he was old and wise enough to know how to kill. (p. 205)

The detective/assistant relationship has broken down completely. The two characters' feelings towards each other are never the same again. The tone of this passage is more decisive than Surbjit's previous viewpoints. At this stage, he is a child passing into a possibly violent adulthood. Sharma is a man who has placed a boy in danger and who seems to lack awareness in important areas. The novel's style of focalisation has allowed the reader to see beyond the image presented by Sanjay Sharma.

When reviewing *Magphur Past*, it is interesting to examine the way in which free indirect discourse gives access to a character's thoughts and perspectives during the process of change and development. Whilst drafting the novel, I wanted the detective and the assistant to reveal their everyday thoughts as they consider their lives. Gupta, at the beginning of the murder enquiry, remarks with self-disgust that he is "no more than Sharma's servant" (p. 59). He is determined to find incriminating details about his new boss saying, "Gaps in Sharma's past needed filling" (p. 61). Later in *Magphur Past*, Gupta climbs safely down from the new building's scaffolding having discovered valuable evidence by questioning Bal:

Walking beside Sharma into the covered food market, he looked around at the square's painted marble floor and the glass fronted shops. The place was busy, getting busier with each second, faster paced than the old city. Too much for him. Then again, maybe not after this morning's climb. Okay, he'd been lucky to find Bal but getting up there, asking the questions, had been real policing and a step forward in the case. Sharma was speaking again. (p. 125)

These words, this voice, marks the beginning of Gupta's reawakening as a policeman. The brief reference to "real policing and a step forward in the case" indicates development. Previously, his attentions were focused entirely on Sharma's movements, watching for weaknesses. Now he feels that he has used initiative, gone into danger and, despite his doubts about being able to cope with the pace of the new city, the excitement of the case has helped his investigator's instincts to return. He undertakes the detailed research into the Magphur Riots with a new verve and defends Sharma from Surbjit's criticism as they stand below Mansoor's apartment:

"You know, Surbjit, for a long time I hated Captain Sharma. I could have done him harm ... easily. I had my chances too. This morning I could have ... He took my job, my honour and, for a while, I thought I was there to run

around for him, just to make him look good. But then I began to see differently ... see myself more clearly.” (p. 207)

This shows that Gupta can look at himself, and his life, more honestly. The sergeant’s transformation remains in place and at the time of the climax to *Magphur Past* he is more fully Sharma’s assistant.

After Manish’s death, Surbjit’s disenchantment with Sharma and Gupta comes to the fore. When waiting to report back concerning Mansoor he says, “They’d sit him down and make themselves sound kind, all to make him do the things they wanted. No more” (p.208). His disenchantment festers. These thoughts result in the terrible confrontation when Surbjit tells Sharma that he has seen Seema, his wife, meeting Mansoor. Surbjit utters them suddenly after much lone thinking in the new Magphur:

“I watched them. Mansoor and Seema.” He dragged the woman’s name from his memory. Had it been Sharma who’d spoken her name? Like a sharp stick poking a wound, he found the target. “They were there, together, smiling at each other ... before they went upstairs, you know, to the place I told you about. Mansoor’s place...” (p. 209)

This is spoken in anger and grief, but Surbjit’s words in this part of the plot show a changed world-view. Even within this tirade we have access to Surbjit’s thoughts with the line, “Like a sharp stick poking the wound, he found the target.” Respect for Sharma has gone. Mansoor’s corrupt but luxurious lifestyle holds appeal and he berates Gupta, in this scene, with the absurdity of seeing “someone who you call a bad man living like a god” (p. 208).

I have begun to trace the relationship between the detective and his assistants in *Magphur Past*. This is an emotionally charged dynamic which changes and develops as the novel progresses. Crucially, Sharma, Gupta and Surbjit lack knowledge of each other for much of the novel and it is their movement towards full awareness and understanding of each other which I attempted to capture by means of free indirect discourse.

My suggestion is that the detective’s interaction with the assistant is one of the writer’s main means of creating a cohesive, enquiry based plot within a multi-focal narrative. When writing *Magphur Past* I was very aware of the features of the detective and the assistant referred to at the beginning of this chapter. In keeping with the detective genre’s conventions, mentioned by Bradley, Sharma has a level of street-wise

expertise which is designed to hold the reader's attention with its unorthodoxy. He is an outsider often operating away from an authority area; he is prepared to use knowledge gained from street people, he does not depend on professional procedures and rules. His participation in a gangland killing haunts him and this has driven him to develop his own sense of justice which only pleases his superiors when it brings quantifiable results.

As for the assistants, Gupta and Surbjit, they are designed to challenge Sharma for interest and complexity without ever overshadowing him. Both are heavily influenced by Sharma. They are not in the plot to be cleverer than the detective, although each of them has their area of expertise. They move in and out of the role of reliable confidante. Their alternative perspectives on events sometime support and sometimes hamper the bringing to justice of Mansoor. The portrayal of the tenuous nature of their working relationships, and my continuing creative dialogue with detective and assistants, helped me to attempt a stretching of conventions. Crucially, it is through their eyes that we see the phases of Sharma's character development, the positive and the negative elements. Maintaining narrative equilibrium was a daunting writing challenge when Sharma, Gupta and Surbjit each have their own powerful stories.

Sanjay Sharma: the creation of a detective in a multi-focal setting.

One issue was uppermost in my mind as I was writing *Magphur Past* and the accompanying critical commentary. This concerned the matter of whether many perspectives would prevent the reader from developing a strong interest in, and an understanding of, Sanjay Sharma. Was I writing a detective story or a novel about a range of characters passing through a section of time and space? Indeed, I was worried that this protagonist would be so hidden away amongst the storylines and foci that *Magphur Past* would lack a vital genre element: a clearly defined detective.

I have tried to make my characters develop over the course of the plot. By gathering some points on Sanjay Sharma, and discussing the clarity of his depiction, I hope to sum up how I have tried to meet the challenge of character development in my chosen narrative form.

The first point to mention about Sharma concerns the origins of his perspective. Independence and unpredictability are key words here. Horsley notes that, within the official police force, there is “the individual investigator who retains considerable autonomy” (2010, p. 179). Ian Rankin - at a talk given at The British Library on December, 2nd 2018 – said that he makes Rebus operate with the independence of a private eye working alongside the team effort and not within it. Messent highlights “the detective whose social values lead her or him to deeply question (the) system” (2010, p. 180). The sense of being at odds with authority, one of Bradley’s points quoted earlier, was where I started when creating my investigator.

My creation of Sharma was strongly influenced by the American private-eye as evidenced in the pages of Hammett and Chandler. This character, James writes, “is as ruthless as the world in which he operates” and he is prepared to take on “the combined strength of the police, corrupt politicians and gangsters” (2009, p. 73 – 74). Porter asserts the independence, and the rebelliousness, of the American private detective by stating that he has “a non-organisation man’s eye” (2003, p. 95). Yet this figure is not remote, but has thoughts and feelings. Hoffman writes that Chandler’s Marlowe is “emotionally engaged when he uncovers the morass of the crime” and that his main motivators are “his male pride and his professional reputation” (2013, p. 24). It is possible to write the same about Sanjay Sharma. Chandler, in his renowned essay *The Simple Art of Murder*, states that the detective must be a “hero” as well as “a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man” (1950, p. 12). The detective story is this man’s search for “a hidden truth” (1950, p. 14). This is the approach which leads Marlowe, Chandler’s private eye to tell a client in *The Big Sleep*, “I do it my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favour” (1939, p. 151). Sharma certainly has the courage and the determination to challenge corruption and to search for ways of solving a crime, whilst maintaining links with the criminal world himself, but he is not always heroic. His personality is made incomplete by guilt and the “hidden truth” is not only within the context of a murder enquiry but within his own past. Alvarez comments on Hammett’s detectives with words which are interesting to apply to Sharma. Such investigators, he writes, “may see all, know all, and

handle themselves with startling confidence, but they are essentially no better, no worse than the crooks they outwit” (1966, p. 211). Seema emphasises this point with the words she hurls at her husband in Chapter 33:

Captain Sanjay Sharma, so clever that he chooses his own rules, the man who knows people ... how they think, how they behave. I tell you, Sanjay Sharma, you are living in the past. Underneath that uniform, you're still the gutter boy living on his wits, fighting the world. Well, this time the problem is with you, inside your own home. I tell you, you and Mansoor are just the same. The same person! (p. 218)

These words are all the more powerful because they come from within the haven of Sharma's own home, the place and the life which he has built to protect himself from the issues of his youth. The shock for him is that the above speech indicates that Seema holds a perspective on his life of which he has been completely unaware.

As far as creating my detective's perspective was concerned, it would have been easy to completely accept the influence of the India based detective novels which I read. H. R. F. Keating's *The Perfect Murder* (1964), in which the harassed Inspector Ghote strives to be both incisive and subservient as he investigates a murder amongst the wealthy classes, shows considerable research and knowledge about India but the people who inhabit the plot are close to being caricatures. Knight, for example, finds this a “patronizing approach” (2016, p. 183). Then there are the Inspector Chopra mysteries by Vaseem Khan: *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* (2015) and *The Perplexing Theft of the Jewel in the Crown* (2016). Here the detective investigates crimes in teeming Mumbai assisted by Ganesh, an elephant. In Shamini Flint's Inspector Singh – for instance, *A Most Peculiar Malaysian Murder* (2008) - the deceptively shambling Sikh detective ranges across Asia solving crimes. Although the settings of these books are vivid and influential, my interest lay more with hard-boiled fiction rather than with their comedic strain. Barbara Cleverley's 2003 Indian trilogy – *The Last Kashmiri Rose*, *Ragtime in Simla*, and *The Damascened Blade* – show the Raj in the 1920's. Joe Sandilands, a hard-bitten war veteran, must solve crimes in a setting which mixes traditional Indian culture, which he respects, with the modern decadence of the expatriate community to which he belongs. A detective who must accommodate and often work at odds with two ways of life interested me.

There were three key questions to ask when I was reviewing Sanjay Sharma's place in my multi-focal narrative. Firstly, how successfully does he develop as a character? Secondly, how successfully does he develop as a detective? Thirdly, does the multi-focal narrative help or hinder his development?

Sanjay Sharma's character is pieced together over the course of the multi-focal narrative. His actions are often viewed and considered by other characters even when he is not in a scene and this is a way of allowing key information to unfold in a way which appears as natural as the ebb and flow of human interaction and deliberation. A picture of Sharma emerges not just from his own words but from a variety of accounts and experiences: Seema tells us of his past bravery and of his present, sleepless nights, Surbjit sees and admires his uniform at a time before this attraction palls, Gopal tells us that Sharma was appointed for his ruthlessness, Gupta initially believes that Sharma is an upstart who has been promoted too quickly by means of corruption.

I have tried to make Sharma's presence pervade *Magphur Past* as the retired Rebus does in Rankin's *Rather Be The Devil*. Sharma is so often in the other characters' thoughts that an image of him emerges over the course of a short text. He is a man who takes pride in the distance he has travelled from living on the Magphur streets to becoming a high-ranking police officer. This shows itself in the attention he gives to his appearance as described by Surbjit. His chequered past has given him an awareness of human nature and this has helped him to succeed. He can judge the characters of those on either side of the law and sees Police Commissioner Gopal's cold-hearted sense of survival, Gupta's insecurity and Mansoor's desire not just for power but for retribution. There is love for his family, yet his work and private obsessions cause him to grow apart from his wife and daughters. Seema expresses the extent of his changed nature and her great concern for her husband's safety. Sharma is a "non-organisation man," "as ruthless as the world in which he operates" and one with his own code of ethics. However, his ability to straddle the legal and the criminal world with ease is crumbling in the changing city.

Sanjay Sharma is an investigator and this occupation offers one of the contexts in which he must be judged. He is not a series detective and another challenge of writing *Magphur Past* was to establish

Sharma's investigative abilities in one short text by viewing him from a variety of perspectives. Although the main detective is not always visibly at the forefront of the investigation in a multi-focal narrative, his influence is felt. Notable examples of detectives who are absent for much of the plot are Sergeant Cuff in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), Campion in Margery Allingham's *The Tiger in the Smoke* (1952) and Lynley in *The Punishment She Deserves* (2019); in these two novels, the other characters, besides voicing their own thoughts, refer to the working methods of the main detective. In her hotel room, shortly before leaving to meet her friends in Chapter 15, Doris is preoccupied with the thought that Sanjay Sharma may knock at her door to continue his questions and remarks that she "hadn't meant to tell him about her illness" (p. 104). Sharma's manner has made her confide. The detective is a presence, uppermost in her thoughts and capable of influencing her actions. Gupta, although initially dubious about Sharma's unorthodox approach, provides first hand evidence of his ability to manage people. Their late night telephone conversation helps Gupta's cynicism to slip away as he realises that working with Sharma is giving him back "his self respect, his pride" and being "like a detective, scared him and excited him but it was a job he could do" (p. 157). Sanjay is a constant in the other characters' awareness. Mansoor sees him as a rival in all aspects of his life, one who is determined and well placed to end his criminal career, and describes him as "a man who knows no rules ... a man who's ridden his luck too far!" (p. 70).

As a detective, Sanjay Sharma has strengths and weaknesses. Despite his ability to judge people, he fails to follow up leads because of his obsession with Mansoor. Ironically, this preoccupation blinds him to Seema's change of mood which itself springs from an association with the villain. Nevertheless, he is correct that Mansoor is behind Ralph Thomas's murder whilst being at the centre of corruption in Magphur. He has sound instincts, but there are signs that these are starting to desert him. It could be argued that Sanjay does not involve himself in a deductive process which involves the uncovering of clues. Gupta does most of the research into past events. Sanjay is seen in the workplace, clearly amidst procedures, but most of his involvement in the Ralph Thomas case is contained in interviews and following his instincts concerning personalities. It is easy for me, at this point, to recall Blair's view concerning *The Moonstone* when he writes

that Sergeant Cuff relies on instinctive “leaps in the dark” and is sometimes “a spectator rather than an instigator” (1993, p. xi). Indeed, Sharma shares some of these features. Pursuing this comparison with Cuff, another character in a multi-focal text, this detective is absent for much of the story and returns only to sum up details of the investigation which he has gained from other people. Cuff operates as a device, albeit an eccentric and memorable one, and we learn little of his full personality. I hope that Sharma is well rounded.

Sharma’s development begins when his life is at its lowest point. The dysfunctional environment of Magphur, and his inner concerns, affect Sharma’s ability to work. I wanted to capture my detective’s state of mind at the very moment that his ability to assess character, the main factor in his success, starts to fail him and free indirect discourse was my tool here. For example, although he manages to energise and motivate Gupta to play a full role in the investigation he never fully notices the resentment which the sergeant feels towards him. He judges the worth of Surbjit’s nature but employs him in an irresponsible way and places him in danger. My detective is a man under stress. His violent treatment of Surbjit is a manifestation of this as well as an indication of the street instincts which he suppresses. This explosion of feeling arises from overwork, the growing crime rate in Magphur and from his sense of guilt at having participated in a gangland killing, the full extent of which is only revealed at the end of the novel. Like many fictional detectives, Sharma is flawed. In *Magphur Past*, he is unable to escape his vision of his young life and his job comes to exacerbate the worst of his memories.

The multi-focal narrative means that we, along with some of those who inhabit the plot, see things which the main character can’t. The detective is viewed from different angles and this emphasises the presence of a destructive character flaw and also gives the reader a perspective on character change and development. The style reflects Sharma’s state of mind which, at one stage of *Magphur Past*, is as chaotic and dysfunctional as the city. The narrative form is based on a creative dialogue with each character so that changes in the directions of their lives could occur at any moment. Such a dialogue is particularly important to have with the detective who, although meant to be driving the enquiry, is at the centre of a personal crisis. I wanted to

place Sanjay Sharma in positions which cause him to react instinctively so that drama arises from these sudden changes.

My consideration of Sharma after he strikes Surbjit was a particularly important element in his character development. In Chapter 33, after both Surbjit and Seema have condemned him and shattered his heroic façade, he begins to appreciate their perspectives when he considers that, “Surbjit had not spoken in anger and neither had Seema. They believed their own words” (p. 218). He apologises to Surbjit so that the boy can tell us “The words cost Sharma some pride, he could see, and they had been chosen carefully” (p. 228). Finally, Seema hears her husband say to her, “I want an end to all this. The bad feelings between us, my pursuit of Mansoor ...” (p. 256). She is able to remark, “Something had changed in him. This was the man she’d known before who could look at people’s thoughts. She saw the family photographs again, the ones of Sanjay standing so proud” (p. 257). At the lowest point of his despair, Sharma leaves Seema, “to lose his thoughts on the streets where she’d told him he belonged” (p. 219). At this point, my dialogue with Sharma led him towards Mansoor for a direct confrontation. However, in the midst of the moving city, he makes his choice, clears his thoughts and becomes a detective and a family man again.

Where my detective’s other characteristics are concerned, it is fascinating to refer to Bradley’s proposed outline of a fictional detective referred to earlier in this thesis and to compare this with my description of Sharma. Bradley writes that the detective has a skill base which operates separately from usual procedure or thought; they are prepared to bend or break rules, they are often anti-authority and they are prepared to risk life or career to solve a case. There is often a mental or physical challenge which troubles the detective and this is the point which gave me rein to take Sanjay Sharma along the route which I had chosen for him. Sharma has a deep concern with a past sin, the nature of which is directly opposed to the rules which should govern his policeman’s life. The nature of his weakness, his guilt, offered scope for Sanjay’s storyline. I began fashioning Sharma with Bradley’s framework in mind but my dialogue with the character led me towards the depiction of his inner struggle and I sought to develop from Bradley’s outline.

I suggest that in *Magphur Past* Sharma indicates his main features – a desire for the truth, a knowledge of Magphur street life, an ability to take risks for the greater good by gaining information from a criminal he should be arresting, a talent for relating to people and a distrust of regular authority. Crucially, however, my story is set at a time when there is an alarming lack of consistency amongst Sharma's skills. The aim of my novel's multi-focal approach has been to enable me to show his struggles from several perspectives and thus to probe more deeply into more aspects of his psyche. In short, the narrative structure, and the writer/character creative dialogue, has enabled me to push the boundaries of the traditional detective's features and, I hope, helped me to create an original character. The challenge of revealing my detective's personal story – amidst many other narratives, including a murder investigation – has taken me on a creative journey which I have loved and which has provided me with lessons for my future writing.

Conclusion.

As a detective, he lived in people's pasts: crimes committed before he arrived on the scene; witnesses' memories ransacked. He had become a historian, and the role had bled into his personal life. Ghosts, bad dreams, echoes.

The above quotation from Ian Rankin's *Black and Blue* (1997, p. 461) is a description of Rebus's professional life. The words could also serve as an outline of the crime writer's task – a concern with past events and with people's memories. The reference to a role seeping into a personal life reminds me of how, as an inexperienced writer, I began to hatch a version of *Magphur Past* during my second visit to India on a reciprocal teaching visit. My mind would touch on the story for moments as I walked the corridors of the Jalandhar school, moved through the streets of the old town on foot or by rickshaw and made the five-hour train journey from Delhi on the Shatabdi Express. It was on this train that I witnessed youths engaged in a mass fight on the carriage which was broken up by stick-wielding police. I continued my thoughts about Sanjay Sharma, Ralph Thomas and the Magphur Star as I travelled across northern India to view the Himalayas from Chandigarh and then to Agra with a tired driver who, like Sashi, was so anxious to please.

This second journey – with its voices, sounds smells and colours – and the ambition to write the novel came just after I retired from teaching in England. At last I was free from timetables, inspections and syllabi

– free to write my personal choice of story. Continuing involvement with the Jalandhar Project on behalf of my school was my only link with a past career. At this point, India filled my mind: the rich tapestry of traditional tales skilfully told to me by school students who knew the language of performance, the contrast between rich and poor as my hosts' driver guided the air-conditioned Toyota towards the new shopping centre with beggars tapping at the windows, the ambition and business sense of the tradespeople in shops and on stalls and the value placed on family life shown by parents seeing off their children on the yellow school buses. Then there was the clear, direct language of the rebellious boys who were sent to sit with me as I wrote my daily report of my classroom experiences. Ostensibly, the idea was that these students should improve their English, but instead, as I held conversations with them, I learned a great deal about the harsher side of life in the city. I remember the old, holy man who squeezed my hand until I screamed outside the Golden Temple, Amritsar. I gave this experience to Ralph Thomas as he walks through the Magphur streets with Surbjit. This was my experience of India.

My composition of *Magphur Past's* storyline gained pace as my thoughts of India receded into the past. The fact that the images in my head retained their power, and still do, gave me the imaginative impetus and scope to mix and mould elements of them into my plotline.

My desire to write detective fiction sprang from a love of reading Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie when I was young. I believe that Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939) remains one of the greatest multi-focal texts. My interest in the detective genre was reawakened by the newer wave of writers – McDermid, Griffiths, May, Rhodes, where multi-focalisation features prominently and consistently. Blending this reading interest with my Indian experience and with my desire to write a story set in that country, my conclusion was that a sense of my experience of India could only be conveyed with the use of multi-focalisation. Only this style could encompass the impressions I had formed.

The narrative style which I chose was not the easiest medium for a writer inexperienced in plotting a detective novel. There were times when I wished I had chosen a more linear approach to plot and indeed, at some writers' workshops – for example, those run by Kate Rhodes and Maria Hyland - was advised by other

participants to do so. Nevertheless, I had set myself a writing challenge, the creation of a mystery, which I was determined to try and resolve whilst developing a range of strong characters and, particularly, a memorable detective. However, my narrative approach also instigated a lack of character clarity in the first stages of composition. Tutorials and critical thinking influenced my planning and helped me tease out and create my characters' voices, their fears and their feelings about those close to them. I was encouraged to ask them questions, to hold conversations with them as I had spoken to those Indian boys. My characters became part of my life. Indeed, the people in my plot developed levels of independence in my mind and I had to bring them back to the purposes of the plot whilst acknowledging that, at times, they would lead me. It was a delicate editorial balance. By the third draft, out of the five I completed, I felt comfortable about replacing my characters' names, apart from chapter headings, with the use of personal pronouns – such was my familiarity with them as my knowledge of their psychologies became deeper. The use of free indirect discourse, the depiction of a voice, was a crucial tool. The aim was, of course, to make the reader feel part of my characters' lives as well. This aim, I believe, took me beyond the boundaries and the structure of a traditional detective story.

The plot of *Magphur Past* is character driven. Sanjay Sharma is my detective, a vital ingredient in the story's investigation. I have described his development through the maze of challenges presented by the multi-focal form and through the choices which confront him by means of the creative writer/character dialogue. His progression through the plot is akin to a journey through the maze of the Magphur streets. I wanted all my characters to undertake similar journeys in keeping with the rhythm of Magphur life and I hope that my device of linking character, individual choice and place has added an element to the structure of the detective story.

Finally, it fascinates me that setting and its effect on narrative, the central part of my original thesis, took up a different position in my thoughts during my studies. Adapting a factual environment, Jalandhar, to a fictional one, Magphur, provided a rich vein of research initially. My knowledge of streets and specific buildings became more of an overarching sense of place as time progressed. My Indian city became an

atmosphere setter, a gathering place for themes – good versus evil, rich and poor. It is also a place which confronts characters with a choice of whether to strive for a sense of purpose or pride or to simply allow events to guide and overtake them. Sanjay can follow his conscience or revert to savagery, Gupta and Surbjit can aim for revenge or keep to a moral code. Magphur is a canvas on to which my memories and impressions are painted as well as a foundation on which my detective story is built.

I am proud to have completed my first detective novel. My ambition is to publish it and write another.

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Murder Will Out. Conference at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Participants included Simon Brett, Alison Bruce, Mick Finlay, Mick Herron, Elly Griffiths. 8th June, 2019.

Crime Writers' weekend at Southwold Arts Centre. Participants included Mark Dawson, Kate Ellis, Felix Francis, Elly Griffiths, Val McDermid. 15th, 16th June, 2019.

One day novel workshop at Anglia Ruskin University: 1st February, 2020. Course Leader: Alison Bruce.

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