

# One

8:00 AM

**November 5, Calcutta**

Radha Sanyal stepped out of the bath and felt the cool air on her naked body. She was a petite woman in her early thirties with abundant dark hair and a lithe body. She slipped on her dressing gown and stepped into the bedroom. Her husband was still in bed, curled up under the blanket.

She smiled. ‘Come on Ranjit. Get up now.’

Ranjit Sanyal was tall, muscular and handsome. At thirty-five, the few strands of silver in his hair and moustache gave him a distinguished air. He rolled over and slowly opened his eyes to look at his wife. She smiled and his eyes darkened with desire as he took in her freshly bathed appearance. His well-developed muscles rippled as he stretched out and grabbed her by the arm.

‘You smell sexy, sweetheart.’

A fiery desire ignited Radha's body as she allowed herself to be pulled towards him. Her gown fell open and she nestled against him feeling the strong hairy warmth of his chest against her breasts. His hands wandered over her body, caressing, squeezing, the fire now raging fiercely through them both. She climbed into bed and kissed him urgently. This was their time, these moments of stolen intimacy in the morning – before the madness began. Ranjit threw her on the bed and kissed her passionately. She reached down slowly and found the hardness she was looking for. 'You drive me crazy, Radha,' said Ranjit as he found her soft moist entrance. Later, she snuggled close to him and kissed him on the lips.

'Darling, get up and shower. I need to get Rana and Priya ready,' Radha whispered in his ear.

Ranjit groaned and pulled a pillow over his head.

Radha hurriedly put on her gown and walked into the kids' bedroom only to find it empty. Rana and Priya were lounging in front of the TV.

'We've brushed our teeth and are ready to go, Mom!' cried her four-year old son.

'Rana, the zoo won't open before 11 o'clock. We've plenty of time.'

'But I want to be the first one there.'

Radha grinned, patted her son's head lovingly and went into the kitchen. She planned to whip up a sumptuous

## The Brotherhood

breakfast for the kids this Sunday morning. Priya followed her into the kitchen and stood beside her. Skinny and quite tall for her age, her long dark hair made the six-year-old look like a little princess. Radha noticed that she had put on her favourite blue dress and shoes. The kids were really excited about this outing.

Ranjit entered the kitchen bathed and shaved, greeted her with a smile, hoisted Priya up on to his shoulders and carried her into the living room. Radha smiled as she heard the kids frolic with their father.

8:45 PM

**November 5, Delhi**

Sanjeev Sharma put down his ballpoint pen and rubbed his weary eyes. He had been working for hours, but the document he was preparing was nowhere near complete. It was already close to nine and he was exhausted.

Sharma was an overweight, fifty-year-old man with a balding head, a puffed face and sagging skin that made him look older than his years. He sat at his desk in a crumpled safari suit, working on a plan which would determine his future.

*Need to go over the damn thing once more.* He closed the file.

The buzzer sounded and he hastily picked up the intercom.

‘Are Shetty and Kapoor here?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied a female voice.

‘Show them in.’

The door opened. Sharma looked at the two who walked in. *As impeccably dressed as ever.* He noticed the smart

business suit, spotted silk tie and well-groomed hair of the man. Only his eyes gave away his sixty years – they were beady and watered constantly and he hid them behind thick glasses. A famous business magnate who owned one of India's largest conglomerates, Prakash Shetty dabbled in everything from biotech to steel.

Suneeta Kapoor, who walked in behind Shetty was in her thirties, no more than five feet tall, and had an hour-glass figure. Dressed in designer red-and-green salwar kameez, her hair done to perfection, she looked ready to step onto a red carpet. Daughter of a prominent politician in Haryana, she was also an influential powerbroker in Delhi who *facilitated* everything – from the appointment of ministers to the twisting of policies.

Sharma smiled politely at them. 'Come in, come in.' He pointed to the plush sofas in one corner of the room. He puffed on his cigarette as they sat silently while his secretary served coffee. There was some small talk, then Shetty came straight to the point.

'I'm sorry, Sanjeev. We have to decline your request. We discussed it at length. None of us thinks that eliminating Hanif is a smart move at this point.'

Sharma frowned. 'But he's getting out of hand. His defiance could be dangerous for us. We need to enforce discipline.'

'We don't care about your personal differences with Hanif. His men will be invaluable for the upcoming

elections. Only Hanif can execute the operation we've planned to perfection.'

'Sit him down and have a word, I'm sure he'll listen,' Suneeta said confidently. Sharma snorted.

He stood up and walked to the window, watching the endless flow of traffic.

'I've managed these brutes for years. Do you think you could do a better job of handling Hanif?'

'Let's not get personal, Sanjeev. You've been managing everything well,' said Suneeta. 'This is a glitch – nothing more. The *Brotherhood* has complete faith in you.'

'Just not enough to let me make my own decisions?'

'Our decision is final. Everyone has voted for Hanif,' Shetty said, with a note of finality.

Sharma realized that there was no room for negotiation. He had to back down. He forced a smile onto his lips and led them towards the dining room. The war was yet to begin.

07:15 AM

**November 6, Lucknow**

The dingy room had a large wooden table in the middle with ten metal chairs arranged haphazardly around it. Sweaty young men whose eyes betrayed fear and anxiety sat there quietly. They would all be dead before the sun set in the evening.

Imran Hanif sipped the hot coffee slowly. A broad-shouldered and heavily muscled man, he had an aquiline nose and a proud chin. The jagged cut across his forehead had turned a merely handsome face into a deeply attractive one.

But he had a bad, annoying cold. In ten minutes, he was to address the group of young men about to embark on a suicide mission. It was not the time to betray any weakness.

‘This early morning drive has exhausted me,’ he said and turned to look at Aamir, his aide and bodyguard.

Aamir nodded. Hanif appreciated the fact that his lieutenant never spoke out of turn.

With a deep sigh he rose from his armchair and strode into the small room. He needed to radiate a passion he did not feel this early in the day. The men looked at him in awe. Most could not believe that they were in the same room as Imran Hanif, one of India's most wanted terrorists.

Hanif stood upright and looked at the assembled men. When he spoke, his voice was firm and strong.

'You're the bravest group of young men I've seen in many years. I know of the incredible hardships you've undergone during your training and how brilliantly you've performed. Because you're the best we have, we've chosen you to execute the most important mission that Jaish-E-Mujahideen has planned. Your commander will brief you regarding the details of this mission that will bring the Indian government to its knees.'

He waited till the applause died down. He was a good orator and a great performer and managed to make every man feel that he was speaking directly to him. He made at least ten such speeches every year. Since the men never came back alive, it did not matter that he used the same words.

'You know how the Indian government is mistreating your brothers and sisters across the country. They pillage, rape and cheat us with impunity. They have the police and army to support their malevolent designs. They think



we are powerless and weak. We need to answer them in a language they understand. One strike can wake them up faster than a hundred pleas.’

There was a roar of approval. A few men started clapping.

‘Today, some of you will make the ultimate sacrifice for your brothers and I have the greatest respect for your decision. I assure you that Jaish-e-Mujahideen will take good care of your families – you watch from the heavens. Now I want to shake hands with each one of you before you go. I know you will make our hearts swell with pride, for there is none braver than you.’

Hanif went round the table shaking each hand warmly, then saluted the group and left the room with Amir. He could hear their commander start his address and reiterate the instructions to each man. He strode out of the cottage and into his Toyota. Losing trained men was sad but the *Brotherhood* had paid handsomely for this *action*. Even after financing the whole operation, paying the families and training their replacements, Hanif was confident that he would net a nice profit for a strike of this size.

The Lucknow serial bomb blasts were scheduled for 5:00 PM and he wanted to reach Meerut much before the strike.