



Aarya
Shreyans Zaveri

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Preface

Aarya has been an extremely enriching journey for me. As the book evolved, so did I. It took over three years to piece together this story. What began with a single idea flourished into this piece of literature. While researching for Aarya, I came across many texts and scriptures of Hindustani origin that intrigued me, enriched my sense of self, gave me a deeper world view and pushed me to evolve as a person. It gave me insights into my true inner self and pushed me to learn more about the world by taking the ever-evasive inner journey.

Aarya is a contemporary Indian fictional story, set in India. It draws parallels from daily life as we know in India. It was extremely satisfying to write this book as I had the freedom to draw from personal experiences and create a fictional world that is deeply rooted in reality.

Aarya will not only take you on a journey that will make you question outwardly happenings and events. It will also guide you to begin a journey that is focused inwards. It will help you open up dimensions in your reality that you never knew existed. I hope you enjoy reading this approach to what I would like to term Swadeshi fiction. With Aarya, I present to you a new chapter in the world of Indian fiction.

Shreyans Zaveri

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The idea, thought, production and physical manifestation of this novel wouldn't have been possible without the immense contribution of friends and family. Here are a few people without whom this book wouldn't be a reality.

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SJZ

The Silent Dance

A warm, velvety blanket settled over the quaint little village in the heart of central India. The air was humid and comforting. A serene array of stars dotted the night sky, fragmented only by far-flung cotton-like clouds that lined the horizon. Lush green trees stood surrounding the village, covering it from the outside world as they merged into the adjoining forests. From the heavy leaves of the almond tree to the lighter petal-like leaves on the ferns, all life forms stood still. The very air of this village was draped in slumber. The night seemed devoid of any movement, and the only sound was that of buzzing insects followed by occasional screeches from barn owls. It was a routine, peaceful night for the townsfolk. A few people however were up to something in the dead of the night. A tall man clad in earth colored robes silently walked through the village and disappeared into the darkness.

The recent digitization efforts in the country were apparent by the neatly lined streetlights and well-lit common areas throughout the quadrangles. A few stray dogs walked through the streets, their paws echoing in a rhythmic cluck, cluck, cluck as their pack moved stealthily in the night. They, too, were

unusually quiet tonight. An eerie, low hum filled the air; it sounded as if it was given out from some electronic device. In the otherwise silent night, the hum reverberated intimidatingly. Over this frightening calmness rose a slow, menacing stream of smoke, wafting up to touch the skies. It seemed to be emanating from deep within the forests and was steadily accumulating into an ominous cloud. This area in the forest was not a very welcome place for many and was, in fact, feared by most village folks.

A neat cemented road ran through the village and connected its interior parts to the national highway. On the edges of this road, toward the outskirts, arose a narrow trail. It seemed more like a walkway that cut across and wound into the forests. In the faint light of the stars, a few slithering snakes were swiftly moving through the darkness. It was unnatural to see so many of them moving in the same direction. It was as if they were sensing a natural calamity of some sort. They moved through this narrow trail, a road the villagers seldom took. Deep within the forest area, where the trail led, stood the holy cremation ground. This was one's last place on earth before they went onward into their journey and became one with the omnipresent ether. On these cremation grounds, a pyre burned bright red with flames that were steadily

growing and reaching out to the skies. The crackle from the pyre was loud and distinct through the otherwise silent night. The flames grew brighter, and an unusual set of people sat around it in a meditative pose. One could hear the familiar hum filling up the air, and now it was more plausible as to where it originated from. A steady drone escaped the bodies of these men as their vocal cords resonated to a mechanical chant. Human bones were placed next to the pyre, and they sat in a pattern that formed a big circle around it. The strange man who was walking through the village, silently joined them in their ceremony. The men themselves were bare but for a few necessary rags covering their bodies. Ash was smeared onto their bodies, and they bore bright red tilaks on their foreheads. The group of men sat still as rocks in what looked like a state of induced meditative trance. The snakes were making their way toward these men and circling them. As if being summoned by the sound, the snakes reciprocated with their presence.

The whole setting seemed sinister and intimidating, but the men themselves were calm and continued chanting as if it was a daily routine. They were seated in some sort of a hierarchy. Each sat in a circle that was drawn onto the earth and was facing

the pyre in a precisely calculated angle. It seemed like an unusual practice, the likes of which were hardly seen or heard of. The fire was emanating from a human dead body and was burning abnormally brightly. It seemed viscous and fueled with something unnatural for it to be raging so angrily. The immediate trees and foliage around the pyre seemed empty and lifeless. Even the animals and other life forms apart from the snakes kept away from this part of the forest.

An ancient, near-forgotten clan of ascetics romanced the free land of Hindustan for many centuries. Their practices were intense and extreme. In fact, most people in the surrounding town feared the Aghori sadhus. And fear has a fixed way of working, as we all know; we fear that which we do not understand. The practices of these sadhus were beyond rational understanding for most people, and the nature of certain rituals earned them a disrespectful, rather fearful place in the society. Nothing they did was normal: their life, their way of living, or their death. Everything seemed extreme, unorthodox, and in some cases, unacceptable. They lived an unexplainable life, which was difficult to fathom from a structured social perspective. These ascetics were irrationally fearless and would go roaring into their own deaths. The village folk knew of the

Aghoris, but they seldom crossed paths with them. These strange ascetics never caused trouble or came begging. Their only claim was over the various cremation grounds, and the villagers were happy to let them have them. They were fully integrated into the social structure as people who dealt with Smashantara, the goddess of death, and people preferred not mentioning them or learning about their lives any further. Here, the Aghoris sat in a circle watching a body burn as they chanted incantations under their breaths. The snakes were moving around them in patterns as they sat there undisturbed by their presence. It seemed like a complex ritual from the looks of it, and they seemed to be in control and deeply engrossed in the performance. They were making precise hand gestures, and their tones would change all at once as if they were interconnected to each other. To any outsider this practice would seem unethical and gory, but to them it was routine. A few hours had passed since they began the ritual. They continued humming in a consistent tone and volume, their pitch not quivering throughout the strenuous ritual.

The night was starved of a moon, leaving only the stars to witness this ritual. They provided very little light to the earth down below. The flame was steadily

growing stronger as if constantly being supplied by an invisible fuel, and it licked the very skies as it roared higher. The corpse burst as the trapped air escaped it, letting loose its fluids, and a mighty flame engulfed the surrounding logs. The Aaghoris sat there, calm and unflinching. After what seemed like forever, the head Aaghoris slowly opened his eyes and looked into the flames. He was built massively; his physique was strong and chiseled down to the last muscle. The veins on his arms showed through in crisp green patterns. His hair was matted and tied up in a rough bun over his head, and his body was adorned with various tattoos. These weren't normal ink tattoos that one would wear as a fashion statement. These were carved into the skin using thorns and filled with soot and animal fat. These tattoos would sink into their skin and remain there forever, becoming richer and more pronounced as the wounds healed. If the wounds didn't heal, one wasn't fit to live, is what they believed. The Aaghoris's gaze grew stern as he read the numerous patterns that were visible in the fierce fire. With an expert gaze, he was deciphering the signs the flame was giving out. He had been practicing this for many years, and he knew exactly what he was seeing. Aaghoris studied natural phenomena all the time. They usually did it around the dead, which made it sound like an insane thing to do. But for them death was something they accepted and

worshiped, unlike most people, who flinch to talk about or even acknowledge it. They had made peace with it, for it was the only certain gift along with that of life. The head Aghori slowly raised his hand to silence the others and indicated that they were to stop the chanting. The fire was giving them some answers. Sometimes they were looking for them, sometimes they stumbled upon them unknowingly. The others fell silent and waited curiously to hear him out; it was only on rare occasions that he would disrupt their practice. “Many years ago we instilled life into a dark silence that came our way.” The Aghori spoke in a deep voice as his gaze continued to read the fire. The flames were dancing and flickering menacingly in the dark night. His hand reached out as a snake slid onto his palm and slithered around his arm. “For all these years I wondered where that life went,” he continued to talk. “That silence is back. And this time it seems to have grown stronger.”

Most people never encouraged the Aghoris, let alone listen to them. Only a rare few went to them for worldly favors, for which there was always a steep price to pay in kind. Else, you stumbled upon them by pure fate. For most of their lives they remained very well hidden from public view. For centuries they co-existed within the realms of society and rarely

interfered in the workings of the world. The Aghoris always spoke in puzzles, but the knowledge of the true practicing Aghoris was nothing short of divine. It ran deep into the unknown abysses of life, sometimes having the most unusual yet simple explanations for complex problems and vice versa. They knew and understood many of the enigmas that the universe presented and how it affected one's being in the human form. Only when one loses all sense of fear can they truly be open to the nature of true knowledge. Aghoris, with their practices, overcame the fear of death. Imagine the strength that would bring to a person. Hence, they had the answers that no one else had. "We must act," he said. All the gathered Aghoris understood what their head ascetic meant and looked at him for further instruction. "We never interfere with the happenings of the world, for it is not ours to save. We watch in silence and we learn. But this one . . . this silence we unleashed upon the world will bring harm to the lands we live in." The Aghori got up from his poised stance and looked at his kin. The snake wound around his arm. "We might have to step into the world of men," he said.

"Why will they believe us?" asked one of the others. He was equally built and seemed to be some sort of a second in command. "They despise us and our

very ways; they always have,” he argued. “You shouldn’t have instilled life that night. You shouldn’t interfere tonight either. It is their problem to deal with now,” he said.

The head Aghori nodded in acknowledgment, understanding very well what he meant. “You seem to remember that night vehemently. They are unaware and ignorant. That is why they deride us,” he replied.

“Then we should let them live in their ignorance,” the second-in-command Aghori retorted.

The head Aghori did not respond. He turned around and continued to study the fire. He lit his crude leaf-rolled cigar with the help of a wooden stick that he pulled from the pyre. He took his time answering as he pulled in a deep puff of smoke from his bright burning cigar. “This time . . . they won’t have a choice but to listen to us. This supernatural power is beyond their understanding to deal with,” he concluded in his deep, commanding voice as the smoke escaped his lips. The fire was casting shadows over his face, and in his eyes one could see the silent dance of the flames revealing to him a deep dark secret that only he could understand.

The Capital Calls

A humble villa stood in the secured bylanes of a quiet little town. This town was more of a village that had developed steadily over the years and was a few hours away from the noisy hustle and bustle of Mumbai. The financial lifeline of India, Mumbai had earned and was often called the city that never slept. This little town was a breath of fresh air from the ever-awake vibrancy of Mumbai. Even though it had developed substantially, it had somehow maintained its silent and peaceful aura. The villa stood in a secluded area by the lake, and the adjoining vacant and vast lands were also secured by the owner. So, in the vast expanse of land surrounding it, the villa was the only manmade structure. Though it seemed humble and minimal, the villa was adorned lavishly. It was sophisticated in terms of décor and was equipped with every creature comfort ever conceived by mankind. A grand piano sat in the living room. Its stark white exterior reflected the elegantly done-up lights around it. The foot pedals were plated with pure gold along with the family monogram engraved in gold on the top. The temperature around the musical instrument was regulated to keep the wood of the piano from aging or warping. A variety of art collected from all over the world was placed in the room. From

wooden doors that were made from the finest and most ancient Indian wood sourced from the holy mountains of Haridwar, to porcelain sets that once belonged to Persian rulers. Everything was handpicked and custom made for the owner of the house. Huge photo frames hung on the wall showing off the family collection of cars and propeller driven private planes. The silverware and furniture linen had the family initials finely embroidered onto them, and the acoustics of the home were designed to keep reverberations to a minimum. All of this was made as sustainably as possible; the entire house ran on renewable energy and garnered zero waste. It was self-sufficient and more resourceful than any other household in the country. It felt like one was walking into an upscale art gallery, only this one was much classier.

Badrikumar, the head butler and man Friday to Mr. Izadyar Rointan Bagli was woken up by an unusual call in the wee hours of the morning. He was hesitant to wake Mr. Izadyar yet and was contemplating the situation. Neethi Kumari Patlikh had called up on their landline phone and urged to discuss an urgent matter with Mr. Izadyar. Badrikumar knew well that Mr. Izadyar wouldn't want to be disturbed by anything menial at this hour, but Neethi Kumari was different.

She was like a daughter to him, and if she was in trouble, he would want to know the situation. Badrikumar considered for a while and decided to wait it out till she arrived. On hearing her, he would then decide if Mr. Izadyar was to be woken up or not. In any case, Mr. Izadyar was an early riser, and if by then he was up by himself, he wouldn't have to worry about cutting his sleep short. The house help was already abuzz preparing for the day. Mr. Izadyar was very disciplined: his day started with yoga and a meditation routine followed by breakfast, after which he scheduled the most difficult tasks for early mornings. He met with people, reviewed daily portfolios of his companies, and then headed over to the board to fulfill his duties as a consultant member to one of India's largest private sector companies, a majority of which was jointly owned by him and his family members. He usually never deviated from his set routine and liked to be in control of each day. Izadyar was a man of finesse, class, and most importantly, silence. His stare, body language, and utter presence spoke volumes for themselves. His presence also commanded a great deal of respect and attention, which he had rightfully earned over the years, and he commanded it with panache.

Neethi had hardly slept that night. Her mind

was preoccupied with the events of the past few hours. Her heart was palpitating, and she felt tense from within. She had asked the driver not to slow down or stop at any red lights or for any other reason whatsoever. She had to anyhow see Izadyar Ji at the earliest. Her car sped ahead along with the security vehicle that was assigned to her by the police force as they made their way through the outskirts of the city to reach Mr. Izadyar's house. It had been a few hours since her mother called and gave her the news. Neethi had rushed to the police station to talk to the inspector on duty and to give her statement to put on record. She was so shaken by the news that she had decided to take matters into her own hands. She didn't want to wait and watch like her coward of a mother did. Neethi knew there was only one man who could help her with this, and that was Izadyar.

Badrikumar looked through the window to see the cars pull into the driveway. He wasn't expecting to see a police car tagging along with Neethi Kumari's car. Although it wasn't unusual, the police cars would accompany only when her father was with her. "This doesn't look good," he thought to himself, and dashed to greet her. Usually the guests were received by someone else and Badri only showed up if Izadyar asked him to. But Neethi was different. Neethi's

personal guard sprang out of the car and held the door open for her as Badrikumar raced out to greet her. At any time of the day, one would find Badrikumar dressed in his trousers, shirt, and a coat. He had hardly aged through the years and was with Mr. Izadyar for as long as anyone could remember. If one were to describe him in a few words, Badri was loyal, steadfast, and attentive. One only had to think, and Badri would know. It was like living with an invisible TV antenna whose frequency was always tuned into your thoughts.

“Badri Ji,” Neethi squealed, and greeted him with a faint smile. She was happy and relieved to see him. Neethi was a slim girl in her mid-twenties. As per her parents she was a fine young lady, but she still wanted to be a girl. She wasn’t sure if the word *lady* fit her yet. Neethi motioned the guards to wait outside along with the police. “This place is safe for me, and the security here is sound,” she told her guards and the police who were escorting her.

“Is everything okay, Neethi Kumari?” Badri asked with concern.

All of a sudden Neethi wasn’t able to string together a sentence. Her heart rate was abnormally rapid and irregular, making it impossible to talk clearly. Badrikumar refrained from questioning her further, led

her to the study, and helped her get comfortable.

“Where is Izadyar Ji? I need to talk to him immediately,” she spoke hurriedly.

Badrikumar drew a deep breath and motioned her to calm down. “Would you like some coffee?” he asked.

“I am fine Badri Ji, just, please, can I talk to Uncle?” she insisted.

Badri wasn't sure how to get her talking. “Perhaps some green tea will help you calm down a little,” he offered again. “We have the finest batch from the hills of Munnar that has recently arrived.”

Neethi sprang up from the chair and spoke firmly, “Listen, Badri Ji, this is a situation of life and death. Now will you please stop acting formal and wasting my time. I need to talk to him,” she squealed. By the time she finished talking, tears were escaping her eyes and trailing down her cheeks.

Badrikumar panicked and motioned her to calm down as he dashed out of the room. Another member of the house help instantly appeared along with some refreshments and stood by Neethi. Badrikumar was left with no choice. The police car escorting her was

proof enough that she was in some grave trouble, and he would have to wake Mr. Izadyar from his slumber. Badrikumar walked through the corridor and stood outside Izadyar's room. He took a moment, gathered his thoughts, and drew a deep breath before knocking. He raised his fist, hesitated a little, and straightened his suit. A few seconds later, he mustered the courage and knocked crisply on the heavy wooden door.

Neethi couldn't stop crying. She sobbed uncontrollably as she waited for Izadyar to show up. Neethi Kumari Patlikh was the first daughter to the second wife of Mr. Curson Mathurdas Patlikh, who jointly owned one of independent India's largest public sector companies. He and his family were the second largest shareholders in the company after what belonged to the public sector. Neethi was very close to her father as all daughters are, and being the head of such a big conglomerate, her father hardly had any time for his family. Also, the concept of second marriages in India was looked down upon at that point in time. So it took a toll on their family life in general. Neethi would wait endlessly to see him, and sometimes months passed and she wouldn't meet her father. After the demise of his first wife, her father had remarried, and Neethi was born as the first daughter to his family preceded by two elder sons from the first

marriage. Neethi wasn't very fond of her mother; she was a woman of many schemes and plots and was never emotionally present for Neethi. She would portray a superficial surface and was something very different underneath. Even as a child, Neethi could see right through her mother. And she never liked what she saw. Sometimes she felt bad for her, but that feeling of pity quickly evaporated with every new plot her mother unfolded. Her father, on the other hand, always made it a point to be there for her. Even though he wasn't physically present for her, emotionally he was a rock she could lean on. Many thoughts were now running through her head as she sat there with tear-stained cheeks and the house help stood by her silently waiting for her to calm down.

The lights in the corridor went on one by one as Izadyar strode through and entered the room where Neethi was sitting. He was a good six feet tall, broad-shouldered and fair skinned, and walked with a god-like demeanor. He had put on his morning robes and walked toward Neethi with anticipation. His hair had completely grayed, making his age visible, but he stood with an erect spine. His mind was as sharp and agile as ever, and his mere presence in the room commanded respect. Neethi jumped and hugged him as soon as he entered, and then burst out crying. Izadyar consoled

her and looked sideways at Badrikumar expecting an explanation. Badri merely nodded in confusion and stood by them. Izadyar patted her head and waited for her to calm down on her own. He gently led her to the sofa and seated her.

“Calm down, Neethi,” he gently spoke after a few minutes.

Neethi took her seat and tried to calm down. Izadyar sat next to her in his armchair while Badri stood by them and dismissed the other house help. The heavy wooden doors shut behind them, engulfing the three of them in silence. Izadyar checked the time on his watch and motioned Badri to pour some coffee. Badri understood the gesture and removed the tea cozy from the French press.

“Neethi, calm down now,” Izadyar spoke with a deep firm voice this time. His voice resonated in the otherwise silent room. “I need to know what has happened. Why are the police escorting you? Where is Curson?” Izadyar waited for her to speak.

The fragrance of freshly brewed coffee was wafting through the room as Badri poured a glass of warm water for Izadyar and handed the coffee to Neethi. The sniffles gently died down as Neethi gulped

the coffee down and sat back trying to compose herself. She took a deep breath and looked at Mr. Izadyar. He looked back patiently and urged her to talk. Izadyar's eyes were deep like an abyss. His eyebrows were thick and bushy, reminiscent to those of a horned owl. Once he stared at you, it was impossible to break contact.

Neethi stared back at him unflinching and mustered the courage to talk. "Dad has been abducted," she whispered.

It took a good fifteen minutes before Neethi stopped crying again, and in the meantime Mr. Izadyar had decided to get ready. Badrikumar was left with her to console her and calm her down. A bunch of napkins were already used and thrown out in an attempt to get Neethi to wipe her never-ending tears.

Izadyar had suited up and was back in his armchair looking at Neethi. He had his phone by his side and was now waiting for Neethi to speak.

"The police called and took my statement along with Mom's. They said they are onto a trail and are looking everywhere." She was divulging the details of the abduction.

"When was the last you heard from him?"

Izadyar asked her.

“Just two days back,” she said. “He was supposed to come see me today,” she whispered, trying to hold her tears back. “The police say he has been missing for more than two to three hours, and there have been no demands or a ransom yet,” she concluded.

Mr. Izadyar was considering the odds as he sat there in a grave mood. Curson was a good friend to him, and this was extremely unsettling.

“I don’t know what to do, Uncle,” Neethi said, feeling defeated and helpless. “They found his car. It was empty. He and his driver are both missing. He didn’t have any security with him at that point. They had a stopover in Delhi for a few factory visits.” She divulged more information in between her crying spurts. “I am scared,” she whispered helplessly.

“I understand, and it is absolutely okay to be scared. Even I am,” replied Izadyar. “We will have to trust in the authorities. I am sure they are doing the best they can,” Izadyar spoke as he considered the entire situation in his head.

“I trust the police completely, Uncle Ji. It’s not them, it’s that I don’t trust their resources. They don’t

have enough to get to Dad in time. We still don't know who the abductor is and what they want. I'm afraid they will fall short of resources and hence time. And time, right now, is the biggest resource at dearth," Neethi concluded.

She had thought of all the possible scenarios and had a very valid point. Izadyar nodded in agreement; he knew she was right. The police force was trustworthy, but their resources and ability to take action wasn't refined enough to be able to perform in the given time frame. If someone of Curson's stature had been abducted, it was no laughing matter. Whoever it was had planned this very well in advance. "You are right, Neethi. We will have to take some action ourselves. I have a person in mind that might be able to help us, but it is difficult to connect with him over a call." Izadyar seemed tense and was still considering the entire situation and the best way to deal with it. He pulled out his diary and began writing down something. That was Izadyar: his thoughts had to be penned down immediately in order to put them to fruition; otherwise it was impossible to plan and do the things he wanted to do. He had adapted to this technique over the years, and it helped him think and execute clearly.

Badrikumar was sitting in the office with a

typewriter, and his head was buried in it as he typed a letter that Mr. Izadyar was narrating. On a piece of notarized document, he was writing out a statement to the police commissioner stating that Neethi Kumari Patlikh was now under his care and that he took complete responsibility for her. That the police escort given to her was being withdrawn and that she understood the consequences of the same. While this was happening, Mr. Izadyar's helicopter was being refueled and prepped for a quick flight to Bombay airport. His team of personal guards was called forth, and they were to travel with him for Neethi's protection.

“Sir, do you want me to contact them and let them know we are coming?” Badrikumar asked.

“Yes,” Izadyar swiftly replied. “Follow the required protocol. They might not give us the time we need, but we will meet them anyway,” he replied.

Badrikumar nodded with a smirk and finished the other calls. The fax machines were buzzing as he sent out the required appointment requests. Izadyar never barged in on anyone; he was always there to see someone with a prior appointment and expected everyone to do the same for him. This was unlike him. But Badrikumar understood the gravity of the situation

and the improvisations that had to be made accordingly.

Izadyar, Neethi, and Badrikumar walked to the waiting helicopter. The blades were already whirring, and the engine was throttling up. Their personal guards escorted them as they settled in one by one. The police, along with Neethi's guards, were sent back to Mumbai via road and were instructed to remain in and around her house, giving everyone the impression that she was home. Neethi's landline phones were directed to her cellular phone, and no one else was made aware of her location. The engine picked up speed as the helicopter lifted off from the pad. They were to reach Bombay airport in a matter of minutes, where Mr. Izadyar's personal aircraft was ready and waiting to transport them to New Delhi, the capital city of India.

SPG

Baldev abruptly regained consciousness, and along with the rising awareness, a sudden stinging pain shot through the side of his head. His vision was blurred, and he struggled to make sense of what was going on around him. For some reason his body wouldn't react to his commands and his brain was fuzzy. He didn't know where he was or what he was doing. A sense of panic was building up in his heart, for he knew he had to accomplish something important. He knew he had to get up and go somewhere. His mouth had an unusual aftertaste, and the splitting pain in his head was spiking up and down. The minute he felt he regained control of his thoughts, they would slip from his grasp and become an intangible mess in his head. His thoughts seemed to be running away from him, and he couldn't control them or decipher what he was thinking. As soon as a train of thought was about to finish, another would spring up, and it seemed interconnected to the previous one in an unusual way. But as soon as he made sense of that, a new train of thought would begin and run into yet another irrelevant memory. He tried to understand where he was, and with tremendous effort, he was able to keep his thoughts in place. He realized that he was sprawled on a hard tile floor, and in that instant the pain in his

body shot up again, making him lose control of his thoughts as they wandered off into endless memories once again.

Baldev was trying hard to fight whatever was controlling his head and his thoughts, but it seemed to be in vain. The world around him continued to spin as he tried to gather his senses and take control of himself. “It is important to wake up and report what happened,” he kept repeating in his head. “But what do I have to report?” his brain asked him, and before he knew it the pain was back. Baldev heard distant voices and tried to latch onto the words as they faded in and out of his mind, but he just couldn’t fight it. His arms and legs were flailing around, hoping to catch hold of something or draw attention to someone passing by. His hands touched the cold floor; the tactile information trying to reach his brain somehow seemed fogged. His vision too remained blurred, and he wasn’t sure if he made any actual sound or if it was just happening inside his head.

A nurse was running the daily rounds in the hospital. She pushed a trolley full of medical supplies as she moved around the corridor conducting her routine visits. She was busy reading from a sheet of paper that listed all the names and medicines, and was absentmindedly pushing the trolley ahead.

Momentarily, she would look up to see if the corridor was clear and to check where she had reached. Stationed every few steps was a guard of the special armed forces. She rolled her eyes at the sight of them and kept walking. In the wee hours of the morning, the national military hospital had been flooded with these guards. The nurse was used to prominent government dignitaries coming in and out of the hospital on a daily basis. But this seemed different. She had never seen so many guards before, and the hospital was abuzz with activity. Although the guards were not interfering with any of the hospital duties, their presence put unnecessary pressure on the staff. Their mere presence in the hospital building put an air of strict tension around them. The nurse tried not to pay attention to them and went about her daily chores. She was reading through her list and suddenly realized that she had missed picking up a few medicines. Seemingly annoyed with herself she wheeled the trolley around and headed back to the elevator. She was already running late, and a trip down to the supply room would throw off her schedule even further. She cursed under her breath and waited for the elevator doors to open.

Many government officers were admitted to the National Military Hospital in New Delhi. Having

security guards flood the hospital wings was a regular sight for the staff and people there. However, today there were military chiefs and a special group of soldiers moving through the hospital floors. A core security team was stationed in one of the main hospital wings, and all the gates were manned by police cars. It seemed unconventional for this level of security to be given to state-level ministers. But it turned out that the dignitary visiting them was no state-level minister. It was the prime minister (PM) of India. He had made a surprise visit to the hospital and had caught everyone off guard. The PM was making a quick undercover visit to the national hospital as he marched in with just one guard in tow. The PM went ahead and walked into the hospital without his usual convoy of guards, heading straight to check on an ailing Indian army soldier. His plan was to meet with the doctors and swiftly head out before creating any discomfort for the hospital staff or other patients. The Indian army soldier was recovering from a brutal attack from cross-border enemy groups. He was fighting for his life, as he was the only survivor of the attack. The prime minister wanted to make sure he personally looked into the well-being of India's army men. He knew his visit would cause unnecessary security complications, and hence he felt it best to swiftly go in and out by himself. But he was the prime minister of

India and there was no way such a visit could be dealt with swiftly. Within a few minutes of him reaching the hospital, his security team was already in place and had secured the entire hospital wing. His primary security team was stationed in the wing that the PM was visiting. The security arrangements for the prime minister were headed by Mr. Pankaj Khurana. Khurana had been standing tall behind the leaders of India for over a decade now. Under his leadership, the government icons were served and protected well. He and his team were a dedicated unit of highly trained individuals chosen to serve, save, protect, and respect the integrity of high-level Indian politicians at all costs. They were the security team that took care of the prime minister and his peripheral dignitaries. Every few years their chief would be re-elected by military personnel, hence keeping their team in constant flux and keeping security in fair and safe hands. This team of individuals was a well-oiled war machine. They were trained and hand-picked from among the highest-ranking officers and were sworn to loyalty. The entire team had remained the same and had moved forward after serving the previous prime minister which was a rarity in itself. Usually a newly elected prime minister would replace the older staff and opt for a new one, but in this case it was different. The PM had kept the same staff that had served the previous minister.

Khurana too was re-elected after a short hiatus and was serving his second term. He had garnered a reckless yet result-oriented reputation for himself. The prime minister was a powerhouse of uncertainty, and they needed someone to keep up with him. Khurana would go out of the way to secure the people under his care, and many times make decisions that were uncanny and against protocol. Many dangerous situations under his command were averted and clamped in time to be kept under control. Khurana always liked to stay one step ahead, but at such times, the PM outdid him. He knew the PM had his best interests at heart, but Khurana wished for him to listen to him more often. The PM greatly appreciated his team and their relentless effort to keep the government secured, but there were times when he just had to make these decisions for the greater good of everyone. And, hence, step away from protocol.

Baldev still wasn't able to remember what had happened and where he was. All he knew was that it was important to get the information across. "But what happened?" his mind asked him again. "Why am I in so much pain?" He knew he was breathing and that he was alive, but then why did his head hurt so much? He had faint visions of what had just occurred, but he couldn't string together any words. "How am I going to

communicate with anyone?” He strained harder to listen and see if anyone was approaching. He heard some mingled words but couldn’t make much sense of them. He started dragging himself toward the sound. His body amplified the pain, but he fought hard and crawled out toward the noise. As he crawled, the pain in his leg intensified tenfold. He felt something warm around his thigh as he dragged himself forward inch by painful inch.

Khurana’s regular day was an epitome of discipline. His day was always planned in advance according to the prime minister and his moves. He was constantly in touch with the team and made swift updates to his schedule per the movement of the ministerial cavalcade. The Prime Minister’s Office had a schedule that updated in real time along with his team, so they were always connected. He started his daily routine with yoga followed by a generous vegetarian breakfast. He was hooked on his daily dose of masala chai, which washed down his food. After this, he would head to the temple and then make a swift visit to the children’s ward at the local cancer hospital. He was on duty 24/7 for the many years that he served. After all, his was the most high-tension job in the country. He had to keep the prime minister safe. He had a list of all his activities, his travel plans, and the people traveling

with him, and everything concerned was broken down to the tiniest of details. He had now been working with the PM for over four years and had begun to understand his patterns: when and if it was necessary for him to break ranks, why and how he would improvise plans, and what his next moves would be. The PM would always try to consult him before doing so, but on the rarest of occasions it was also extempore. Khurana kept a step ahead. He knew the PM had little control in his hands due to the immense work pressure, but he was prepared no matter what. Leading a country like India was no easy task, and someone like the prime minister had to constantly improvise. Khurana was the perfect person to keep up with his pace, and he handled it with utmost ease.

He stepped out from the children's hospital building and got into his car to get to the military hospital where the PM was currently situated. He looked through the day's list of activities and visitors. The PM was scheduled to meet a few people in and around the capital through the day, and it seemed like a routine city day with modest local-level security. Khurana checked the itinerary thoroughly and didn't notice the possibility of any more surprise visits for the day. All his meetings were with the officials, and they were already cleared for security from the prime

ministers' office. He flipped the sheets of paper, glancing through them to make sure he grasped the information. He smiled to himself thinking how apologetic the prime minister would be as soon as he met him.

The nurse was double-checking the list of medicines that were to be given out. She didn't want to waste another minute; she was already running late and quickly piled up the required quota. As she reached the bottom of the list she saw something move through the corner of her eye, and suddenly a hand grasped at her ankle. She screamed and fell to the floor toppling the entire trolley with her in a massive crash. The vials crashed to the floor and broke, dispelling their contents. She was desperately trying to free herself, but the hand held her firmly and wouldn't loosen its grasp on her ankle. The liquid from the vials leaked and soaked into her clothes. She kicked frantically and tried to free herself but couldn't. She looked around to see who was holding her as she continued her screams. Through her desperate screams she saw a man dressed in a slick black uniform was holding onto her. He seemed to be twitching and was trying to say something but couldn't. He reached into his pocket and threw out a phone; it was a modest phone which had a keypad and a small screen. He had

hit the speed dial and it was already connecting. The nurse picked it up and freed herself from his grasp. He threw his ID card toward her and passed out completely. She understood that the man was trying to ask for help and not assault her. She caught her breath as she tried to scream for help. Her heart hammered and she was shaking from fright. The phone was flashing on the floor, and she heard a faint ring on the other end. She was trying to calm down from what just happened. “This strange man, who is he?” she thought. She gathered herself and looked up his name on the ID card. Suddenly a very firm “hello” was audible on the phone. She had forgotten that the phone was connecting to someone, and was startled from the sudden voice. She picked up the phone. “He . . . hello. Who . . . who is this?” she strung together a sentence, not sure of what else to say or ask.

There was a moment of silence from the other end before the voice spoke again. “This is SPG Director Khurana, and you are?” his crisp voice rang over the small speaker of the phone. The nurse held the phone close to her ear and looked at the ID as the words “Special Protection Group” stood out boldly on the top with the name ‘Baldev’ and other details printed below it.

About the author

Shreyans Zaveri is a budding author and Filmmaker. He loves and enjoys storytelling. He has a strong inclination towards learning, understanding and practicing the spiritual aspects of life. For making this novel, he has learned, researched and practiced along with and from various spiritual world leaders. A lot of his style of fiction and fantasy is deeply rooted and has strong basis in the Hindu and Jain texts. From touching upon the Vedas to exploring theories of metaphysics as explained in the Tattvarthasutra, his style of fiction is a reflection of his heritage.

Shreyans holds a Master's Degree in Philosophy from the Mumbai University and a Masters in Visual Effects from the Savannah College Of Art & Design. Apart from that he is an avid naturist and loves to spend time under the stars and in spiritual retreats. He is currently working on his third novel titled "The Fiddlers Green" and an untitled self-help book for countering OCD. Shreyans was born and brought up in Mumbai, India and currently resides in Santa Clara, USA. The seeds of his stories are proudly rooted in India and are made for the world.