



AN INCORRUPTIBLE NATION



SUJATA

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DEDICATION

To The Ever-Burning Incorruptible Spirit In You.

To The World: Striving To Be A Better Place.

Prologue



D A R K N E S S

THE NIGHT WAS impenetrable as a fortress.

With his heart in his mouth, seven-year-old Ramabhadrha hustled barefoot behind his sister, Ishwariamma. For what seemed like the nth time, he tilted his face towards the sky, searching for light, only to see a crescent moon that shed none.

'Useless moon.' The thought crossed his tiny mind while he hurried to keep pace with his sister.

Holding a rusted sickle in one hand, she scampered down the bushes as if she had run down this path a thousand times. While she prowled like a tigress, Ramabhadrha was fighting a sense of invisible danger in his heart.

The spine-chilling eeriness of the night, the continuous chirping of crickets, the cry of cicadas, and the hooting of owls were sending shivers down his little body.

He stopped dead in his path as if he had seen a ghost.

"Akka." His voice was a pained whisper.

As a silent protector, she swiveled to him with a hiss, "Don't

make a noise. Reddy will get up and bash us both. Just follow me. Understand?”

She turned away and surged ahead.

“*Akka!*” he whispered again, not heeding her warning.

Irritated, she turned to her brother and lit his face with her pencil flashlight.

“Rama, don’t you agree we have to pluck a lot of flowers for Lord Vitthala before the villagers do?”

Yes. He nodded without any hesitation. It had been his idea to venture out before dawn, compelling his sister into the adventure of gathering flowers. But for some reason, he was tight-lipped, and not ready to move ahead.

“Shall we go home?” she asked, knowing well he would not agree.

No. He shook his head emphatically.

“Okay then, come, let’s finish what we started,” she said.

“I can’t,” he finally whispered.

“Why? Who is stopping---”

“Snake,” he blurted out before she could finish her question.

“Where?”

“I’m standing on it!”

Ishwariamma moved the torchlight down to her brother’s feet. To her horror, she saw a thick golden-yellow cobra coiled around his left leg.

‘Oh God! It could kill an elephant. But where is its head?’ she thought in panic. The snake was hell-bent on crushing Ramabhadrā’s leg with all its might. It dawned on her that her brother was standing right on the cobra’s head.

“Rama. Don’t move. Don’t move an inch!” Her voice was

a muted scream fused by the fear of the snake, and of Reddy's wrath.

"*Akka*, please remove it---*Akka*? It will bite me, *Akka*. Please."

Ishwariamma could see the grief in her brother's eyes, his imminent death overwhelming his lids in the form of tears.

He tried to jerk the snake off his leg.

"No..." She screamed.

* * *

1

Parashuram in 7RCR



IN THE SEVENTH BUNGALOW on Race Course Road, under the faint illumination of a night lamp, Prime Minister Parashuram shifted uncomfortably in his king-sized bed. His cheeks twitched to some far unknown feeling in his sleep. The air-conditioner's display panel read 25° C, but his forehead glistened with droplets of sweat.

His body spasmed, legs kicking out under the blanket. Even though the sounds of his kicks on the mattress were deadened by the blanket, they were like a siren call to his wife, Indu, sleeping beside him.

She sprang up from her slumber as if electrocuted by a live wire, fumbled for her bed-lamp switch and turned it on. Without wasting a moment, she turned to him, gripped his arms and shook him. Her voice was a bit panicky as she called out to him, "Ram... Ram..."

On her second call, Parashuram's movements ceased abruptly; his eyes opened, wide and alert. In a state of bafflement, he threw her a quick glance, sat up in a hurry and checked inside his blanket to find---nothing.

"What is it, Ram?" Indu asked gently.

He could not say a word. He shook his head rapidly from side-to-side to clear his thoughts.

“Ram?” Indu’s voice was gently insistent, soft as butter, and as refreshing as the dew. She knew from her past experiences that he had dreamt again of the cobra. But tonight it seemed different; the kicks had been more frantic and harder than usual.

‘Is the stress getting into his head?’ She wondered, concerned about his health.

“It was the dream,” Parashuram finally said. His tone was a guttural rumble---like a storm brewing inside him. It was not the tone of a feeble-minded person who’d fear in his dreams; it was a tone that could instill a feeling of awe in the heart of the wildest of beasts.

“I’m sorry I woke you up.” The apology was written all over his face. She knew he meant it. It was her thirty-third year of matrimony with her Ram, and she completely understood his feelings. She drew closer and put her arms around him, enclosing him in a warm hug.

“It’s okay, Ram. I think you are stressed. Don’t worry... Everything will be okay.”

‘Everything appears okay...’

He wanted to say it out loud but kept it to himself.

He was mentally tough and she was aware of it. In a few hours, this man would be juggling a million duties, interacting with the nation’s best and brightest, but at this moment, he was as helpless and open as a toddler in her arms.

He stretched himself and picked up his mobile phone from atop the nearby *divan*. The display showed 02:17 AM. His brows furrowed. He had been asleep only an hour or so.

“You go to sleep,” he said to Indu, his mind still dazed.

“And you?” Indu was quick to respond.

“I will join after some time.”

“Hmm... I’m sure you will,” Indu sighed. Her remark was loaded with sarcasm. It was the only promise he had ever failed to keep, since that fateful day all those years ago. Two teenagers who were not supposed to meet. She reclined her head on the pillow while Parashuram gently dragged the blanket over her ears. He looked at her face in the soft light of the bedside lamp for an extra moment. She looked the same as that first day---ethereal.

“I know what you are looking at,” Indu said without opening her eyes.

Parashuram was startled.

“I was just thinking...” he said, with an act of clearing his throat.

“What?” Indu snapped.

“Should I increase the AC temperature?” He found the right words. Her hypothyroidism had been detected 25 years ago, and he was well aware of her sensitivity to cold because of it.

Her gratefulness echoed in her approval. “Please.”

‘Very soon, global warming will melt down the whole of Antarctica.’ Parashuram pondered as he aimed the remote control at the air-conditioner’s display.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

He pressed the button three times. The display panel now showed 28^o C. He wanted to press one more time but decided that twenty-eight should be comfortable enough. He tilted his cell phone, looked at it resignedly another time, and then looked past the bulletproof glass window.

The night was the darkest at that hour. He thought of something, switched off the lamp and climbed out of bed.

“Try to get some sleep, unless you want to doze off in the

helicopter,” Indu’s sleepy voice followed him. Parashuram stopped in his path.

“Let me see,” he replied diplomatically.

His state of sleep had always been fragile from his childhood days. Once awake, it was a challenge for him to go back to bed. More often than not, this had helped him finish his unfinished works in peace while the whole world was snoring through the night. He had consistently astonished a lot of colleagues and the people by the pace and sheer volume of work he accomplished in a day.

His punctuality and disciplined approach towards the projects he undertook as the Chief Minister of Maharashtra had won him accolades from several quarters, despite a lot of opposition. His endeavours in the field of public administration, industrial development, law and order, land acquisition and real estate development set a benchmark for other states to match his ways of working. All the positive outcomes of his work propelled his stature several leagues ahead of his peers. While a major section of his party had accepted him as the next Prime Ministerial candidate, an influential section opposed the very idea of elevating his stature.

Some said his way of working was filled with risk; his dictatorial attitude towards accomplishing the work or restoring peace a threat to democracy.

Parashuram gracefully accepted the challenges thrown at him, and accomplished impossible-looking projects in record time, exceeding all expectations. He had his ways of sorting out the issues and arriving at the best possible solution.

Crores of people had voted him not only for his earlier success as a Chief Minister, but because they were incensed by the continuous enduring environment of corruption, inflation, and economy paralysis. The election results gave his party the

status of the 'Single Largest Party', but they were not enough to form the Government on their own. After five days of meticulous negotiations, Parashuram was ready to ascend the steps of the South Block in the Secretariat Building, with the support of four regional parties.

With each rising step, a feeling of utter responsibility sheared him down. Each step was a promise on which his Party had ridden to near-victory. The thought of pseudo power in a coalition Government was corroding his heart from within. He was in a dilemma---whether to just run and manage the Government or to move ahead with reforms that would change the course of the nation forever.

The second choice seemed a far cry in the present scenario. And if the first choice was to be adopted just to save the Government, then they had already promised a big lie to the people. Or big, big lies.

'There are a thousand things to set right.' The thought felt like a stab in Parashuram's neck while he walked down the bungalow corridor. He stopped in front of a room and fumbled for the switches on his right side. Not finding the switches on the right side, he swept his left hand on the opposite wall. He had only shifted to the bungalow four months ago and had yet to get a feel for it.

His son Ravi had specially flown down to Delhi for his swearing-in ceremony. Two days after the ceremony, he had left for Harvard University, where he was continuing his course in Business Management.

Most of his time was spent in the South Block to ensure a stronger foundation for the new Government and to grease the jammed bureaucracy for proper functioning.

With the click of a switch, the whole room lit up, revealing the library. A glint of happiness shone in his eyes at the sight of his huge collection of books. He closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of the library deeply. He loved the smell of the books. From floor to ceiling, bookshelves ran parallel inside glass chambers. He had always been a voracious reader and had accumulated a vast collection over time.

His gaze fell on the grand mahogany desk at the center of the room. There were two stacks of files lying on it, marked classified. His look told everything about the importance of the files. He seated himself at the desk and got to work.

The front page of *The Times of India* proclaimed: 'BIHAR'S FLOOD WOES: 600 DEAD, 1,500 MISSING & STILL COUNTING'.

He had already read the paper from beginning to end at least five times during the day. Every time he thought of the flood, he felt a pang in his heart.

An innocent question tormented him repeatedly. *'For how long do people have to die like this?'*

Incessant downpour for three days had hit a large area of Bihar. Roads, railways, and airways were equally affected. Army and air force personnel had been deployed in full strength to evacuate people to safer places. But rescue operations were at a disadvantage due to the flood and rain.

Parashuram looked at the wall clock. The time was 2:45 AM. Just when he was mentally planning something, the phone rang, much to his surprise.

'Who is it at this hour?' he wondered while he picked the receiver and spoke, "Hello?"

"This is SPG commando, Arjun Dixit. Is this the Prime Minister?" A loaded voice crackled from the phone.

“Yes. Parashuram here.”

He ambled to the window and peeped out, the receiver tucked against his ear.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir. Saw the lights on in your study... I just wanted to confirm that everything is alright.”

Parashuram could make out dark armed figures strutting in the distance---the ever-vigilant commandos; his SPG. The message was clear and loud: Nobody goes in or out without their confirmation.

‘*Spooky cats*,’ Parashuram thought with an amusing shake of his head. The voice again crackled in, “Is everything okay, Sir?”

“Yes. Yes. Thank you,” he confirmed in an assuring tone and placed the receiver down.

‘*Arjun Dixit*.’ Parashuram’s mind wandered to the day when he was mentioned as the ‘Prime Minister Designate’. Two days before the oath-taking ceremony, he had the security cover from the National Security Guard---the NSG. The Special Protection Group commandos had arrived at his residence to take over his security responsibilities from the NSG. Arjun had been the first to approach him. Parashuram had liked the guy right away.

Standing over six feet in a crisp suit, his wide chest drew undivided attention; his shoulders were thrown back as he trampled down the path. His daunting eyes seemed to pulverise the path ahead. Sincerity oozed from every part of his body. He meant business. He was the perfect paradigm of the group’s motto---Bravery, dedication, and security.

* * *

2

A Conspiracy to Kill



WHILE PARASHURAM WAS settled in the library pondering the Nation's challenges, a conspiracy was being hatched against him, right under his nose, just a few kilometers away from 7RCR; if successful, it had the power to eradicate him from the face of the earth, and dismantle the nation's future growth plans.

Inside one of the world's most exquisite Presidential suites, three dissatisfied and restless souls were having a serious meeting when half the world was still in bed. The suite had extravagantly designed interiors and plush decor---all glass and gold.

They say the devil treads the night.

Ice swirled in two whiskey goblets sitting on a black granite tabletop. Bubbles around the ice cubes surfaced and popped into thin air. A bulky muscular hand lifted one goblet to his dark tobacco-stained lips, took a swig, shut his eyes and felt the burning sensation slide down his throat. This man was Dattatreya, the Leader of Opposition in Parliament.

A thick mustache sat on his glum face, and his neck seemed to be an extension of his trunk---like that of an ox. Once upon a time, he had been Parashuram's best friend, playing in the slums of Bombay; now the deadliest enemy of all.

On the other side of the desk, a knotty and sinewy hand

gingerly lifted the goblet and sipped his whiskey. The man was Gajendra Chandel, Home Minister in Parashuram's cabinet. He was the head of a small faction within the party which had sternly opposed the nomination of Parashuram as the Prime Ministerial candidate. God only knew how much Gajendra craved for the premier post of the country, but he had lost out on the popular vote.

Patience. Patience was one of Gajendra's virtues and he firmly believed that he was eminently suited for the Prime Minister's post.

He got up and walked to a tinted, floor-to-ceiling one-way window. A hint of a limp in his left leg was quite ominous. He peeped out the window, his eyes admiring the excellent skyline of Delhi. His eyes gravitated almost of their own accord to the majestic, lit-up Rashtrapati Bhavan, glowing in supreme power against the darkness of the night.

Contrary to Dattatreya, Gajendra was a tall and slender man in his late sixties. His protruded snout hung high. With sunken eyeballs and darkened under-eyes, his face resembled a hungry hyena.

'Every dog has its day. And I will have mine,' his scheming mind proclaimed.

Towards the right of Dattatreya, a somewhat modest and reserved Kripajal Pujari enjoyed his drink while chomping down upon a fried chicken drumstick. Anyone would have been forgiven for dismissing him as a commoner due to his not-so-elegant dress sense, short stature, and balding head. But make no mistake, the man settled cozily in the La-Z-Boy recliner was none other than the prime sidekick of Dattatreya.

He was the most honest and cunning *hawala* kingpin this nation had ever seen. His only weapon---honesty---had kept

his diary swelling with corrupt politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats and the who's who of the nation. Arrested as a common thief two decades ago, he had become the undisputed leader of the dark underbelly of the political world. With his innumerable connections in the power corridors of different nations and their banks, he was the mastermind in siphoning out billions of dollars and stashing them in unknown foreign locations for his clients. The alias that suited him best was the ironic '*Honest Fox*'.

Gajendra limped to a pair of curtains hanging over a doorway. With a tug at a string, he drew them to reveal a room filled with black suitcases. "Total fifty in number; five hundred crores," he said seriously.

Dattatreya emptied his goblet in a single gulp and unleashed a sarcastic cackle.

"Very rarely have I seen people so elated after losing a Lok Sabha election," Gajendra craftily commented.

"I feel amused to get my share from the Home Minister of a nation whose Prime Minister is a crusader against corruption," Dattatreya cackled again as if it was very funny.

"It has become a tad difficult to amass such an amount when the empowered panel of auditors is keeping a vigilant eye on almost every transaction," Gajendra said with a hint of uneasiness.

"Hmm... I know that prick and his capability for delivering a sting. I have a long list of issues to settle with him, simmering for a long time. Let him play a bit... The issues like black money and corruption upon which he blew the trumpets and came to power might very well be on their way to dethrone him," Dattatreya emphasised.

“What if he really pulls a rabbit out of his hat? I mean we have seen what he can do,” Kripajal intervened.

Gajendra and Dattatreya exchanged a glance and both laughed hysterically.

“My dear friend, corruption and politics have been friends for ages. People in power have always carved out a niche for themselves,” Gajendra said with full confidence.

“And how would this nation run without corruption? It’s... It’s a part of the nation’s growth...” Dattatreya tagged in tango.

“... It’s an abnormally strong craving, it’s an inspiration, it’s a motivation to move ahead, it’s an unwanted truth...” Gajendra suggested. He took another swig from his goblet and continued, “... It’s an incentive to accomplish things quickly. Moreover it blows away the dust from the files...”

“... The government ends up paying salary to everyone, whether he works or he sleeps, but corruption, corruption is dependable. Two drops of corrupt oil can make a two-stroke engine run like a hundred stroke engine... Just two drops,” Dattatreya emphasised.

“And who is going to stop it? The Law? We have laws framed to control it, but then, don’t we use the law as a saviour?” Gajendra looked serious as he said the bitter truth, “Because corruption is there, we are talking about our growth. And after everything, if something is left, we can talk about the nation.”

The three men clinked their glasses in a toast.

“To corruption friends, to corruption,” Gajendra continued, “It’s only because of corruption that we are not tearing each other apart... Rather, we are at peace... complete peace.”

“And this son-of-a-prick is not happy with peace,” Dattatreya grumbled in his drunk condition.

“Why doesn’t someone put him out of his misery?” Gajendra roared.

“Shh... Slow down, Mister Chandel, slow down. Sometimes walls can have ears,” Kripajal cautioned him, and sly as a fox he asked, “Did you really mean what you said now?”

“Why? Can you accomplish such a task?” Gajendra questioned.

“Precisely not me, but I do have clients who specialise exactly in such sort of businesses.”

Gajendra finished his drink and erupted in an emphatic tone, “Excellent.”

* * *

In the library of 7RCR, Parushuram gazed at his reflection in a hanging mirror. He closed in on the mirror and looked deep into his eyes as if searching for some answers. He had turned sixty-three last winter, but no one would have guessed that based on his appearance, estimating him to be in his mid-fifties instead. His graying hairs were a tribute to his journey to his post.

‘What a long way I’ve come!’ Parashuram reflected on his long journey as he observed fine wrinkles under his eye--- every wrinkle seemed a scar from a bloody war he had fought.

The disturbing dream and the hour before the break of the dawn ruffled a page of history embedded inside him. Suddenly, something dawned on him. He turned and went to the desk. From the upper drawer, he retrieved a key. He looked at the key

and inserted it into the keyhole of the lower drawer. He pulled the drawer out and took out a cardboard box.

The box looked prehistoric.

As if there was a special connection to the box, his long, knotted fingers hesitated for a moment before lifting the lid.

He felt as if he was being swept away from the room as he glanced at the contents. It was a colourful collection that he had treasured since his childhood. Glass marbles of different colours gleamed up at him. Old matchbox labels stood upon one another, cleanly stacked in rubber bands, while a collection of conches was strewn among two inch pencil stubs, wax crayons and two rice tillers with the leaf and panicle intact.

It was a universe for him!

He carefully pulled out an old black and white photograph from the bottom of the box. He looked at the picture for a long time.

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For the past fifty years, his father's ashes had been with him. It was an oath he took while collecting his father's ashes into the urn that prevented him from immersing them in the holy river. The pitcher reminded him of the principles his father had lived by. The day he fulfilled the oath, his father's soul would get salvation.

Then

Fifteen year old Ramabhadra's world turned upside-down when he was fleeced off from all of his family members one after another by the cruel hands of destiny. Alone.

Marooned. Devastated. All of a sudden the question of his very survival stood like an unconquerable mountain. But he had a mission to accomplish.

Now

As Prime Minister Parashuram, heading a coalition government, steps up the gas to eradicate corruption forever, an unavoidable adversary from his past steps up to a conspiracy to eliminate him before he could succeed.

Can he risk everything one last time to accomplish the mission?