



## The Edge of Violence

Ranjan Sen

The high ceilinged, expensively decorated hotel lobby was awash with clear, winter sunlight as the huge bay windows looked out on the deep blue seas off the Goan coast. There was a hum of cheerful activity as the wedding planners of the Sisodia-Bagrodia union attended to incoming guests and escorted them to their rooms, replete with welcome hampers full of goodies, garlands of scented flowers and a schedule of entertainment and appointments for the rest of their stay.

European, Middle Eastern and North American guests floating through the lobby stopped to enjoy the exotic sights - the rich ethnic outfits, the profusion of flower arrangements,

the teeka ceremony, the bouncy welcome dhol rhythm and the sheer warmth and *joi de vivre* of the coming together of two large Indian families - many of the foreigners stopping ask questions or take photographs.

The hotel's front desk staff were occupied with their regular duties relatively undisturbed by the wedding arrangements, tending courteously to their steady flow of wealthy guests as the wedding planners took care of the marriage invitees.

It was the bellboy near the lift who heard it first, a distant shriek that grew ominously closer as one of the main elevators descended smoothly towards them. As it neared the lobby, the disturbing high pitched screaming crept through the crowd insidiously, dampening the festivity swiftly and repressively like a dark cloud slowly casting a creeping shadow over the gathered people, until the whole floor fell silent, waiting for the doors to open and reveal the horror inside.

It all started way back in 1976, under a monsoon sky on a lonely, meandering road leading to Calcutta.

A white flash of lightning ripped the gray, cloudy sky into jagged fragments as the accompanying thunder rumbled deeply, rolling away towards the rain soaked horizon.

SK Babu disembarked from his shining black Mercedes with the help of his faithful driver as two well used white Ambassador cars behind him disgorged a number of his men, sporting the rolled sleeves and the brawny arms which indicated their profession. He had been summoned by an urgent phone call from the nearby post office, so he had some idea of what he was walking into. His measured, deliberate glance moved slowly from his three trucks which were incongruously standing idle in the middle of the road, to his three truck drivers squatting nearby with blood spattered shirts and battered faces, coming around slowly to rest on the large group of youth gathered under a Party flag on the side of the asphalt, raucously drinking out of tin cups.

"Who is in charge? Why have my trucks been stopped?" SK Babu asked in the authoritative manner of one used to having his commands obeyed. His voice was calm and steady, but the rigidity of his shoulders and back betrayed his tension.

The group of youngsters insolently ignored SK Babu and continued their boisterous conversation, but one of the young men separated himself from the group and walked quietly towards SK Babu. He was tall, with shrewd deep set eyes and the inevitable long hair copied from the Hindi film icons of the times. Unlike his lean colleagues, he seemed to have invested considerably in building his physique, with strong muscles evident under his partially unbuttoned shirt.

He stopped a few yards from SK Babu, a non threatening distance intended to convey respect.

"Shaheb, nomoshkaar"

SK Babu nodded politely in acknowledgement, but did not say anything. He was an old hand at dealing with recalcitrant Bengali youth, he knew better than to rush in headlong into any confrontation or reveal his hand first.

There was a long moment of silence, while both men sized each other up. SK Babu turned back briefly and in response to the unspoken signal his men walked a few steps forward and stood behind him.

The tall young man took in the gesture and a boyish grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. Far from being intimidated, he was apparently enjoying this.

"Shaheb, can I say that your men had three chances?" he said in steady voice, pitched loud enough so that it carried all the way to his men as well.

SK Babu tilted his head questioningly, but did not say anything.

The tall youngster ticked off actions on his fingers “First, when the Party announced this Bandh – we told everybody, we had loudspeakers on rikshaws, even the radio news covered it; second when we put up posters all over Bengal, everybody saw it; and again, third when I personally visited your garage and explained to them that they need to stay off the roads today” He stopped for a dramatic pause and then splayed out his hands “What more could I have done?”

He glanced back at his group of Party workers, who had fallen silent and now were listening keenly to the exchange, squared his shoulders and looked SK Babu in the eye. “Tell me Babu, after this, the consequences are their responsibility, na? If Jhontu Ghosh lets them go after this, neither the Party nor the public will trust me again.”

Jhontu seemed to have deliberately separated the actions of the men from the decisions of their master, offering SK Babu a face saving opportunity to rise above the conflict. The slight relaxation of SK Babu's posture grudgingly acknowledged the rational tone and the proffered opportunity.

Sensing an opening, Jhontu stepped in and spoke softly so that his men could not overhear "If you leave now, we will look like we have protected the sanctity of the Bandh. But your trucks don't have to go back, I will keep them here and release them after dark. I will get some of my trusted boys to accompany the drivers, who can drive them through the night to make sure they reach their destination tomorrow morning..."

Struck by the simplicity of the solution and realising that a potentially violent conflict could be completely avoided, SK Babu nodded almost imperceptibly and replied in an equally soft voice "Come and meet me". After which he stepped back in an exaggerated gesture and for the sake of both sides protested indignantly for several minutes about the harassment of honest business men and threatened police

action while Jhontu feigned arrogant indifference, hands in pockets.

SK Babu then turned abruptly on his heel, stopping to speak briefly to his drivers before leading his little cavalcade back to Kolkata.

Jhontu Ghosh eventually did go to meet SK Babu.

Not after just a day or even a week, that would have shown undue keenness and would have placed him in a weak negotiating position, but within the month.

After all, Subodh Kanti Aggrawal was a powerful construction company owner, a respected figure in the Marwari business community and came from a pedigreed, wealthy family.... Not a man to be ignored or trifled with.

A couple of uniformed watchmen stopped the tall young man at a huge wrought iron gate, through which he could see manicured lawns surrounded by flowering bushes and a multitude of trees, almost hiding the large mansion beyond them. As word was delivered from the house that babu would see the visitor, he tried hard not to be impressed by the opulence.

SK Babu had over the years developed an unshakeable faith in his own ability to instantly judge character, born as he had been to commanding wealth and having overseen a plethora of domestic professional subordinates from an early age.

He unhesitatingly offered the young Party foot soldier a job.

Jhontu had been expecting some sort of a surreptitious cash reward and was taken aback by the sudden job offer. He pursed his lips thoughtfully and promised to think about it, before taking his leave.

While he battled with his conscience and Party commitments over the next few days, SK Babu cannily upped the ante and had his men bring Jhontu's widowed mother before him so he

could benevolently inform her of the offer of a prized a regular salary for her eldest son, promising to complete his education and offering her family the financial security and legitimacy that all her neighbours were struggling for.

Jhontu as a quintessential young Bengali man had no defence against his mother's wishes. And thus masterfully outflanked by superior tactics, Jhontu migrated from enforcing communist policy in rural Bengal to facilitating construction development in and around the great metropolitan city of Calcutta in the tumultuous 1960s.

Jhontu was not just very good with his fists, but also with words; add to this a school education till the eighth standard, a curious mind and a quick grasp which helped him learn the key business levers quickly – he quickly became a potent force in his new role.

On several occasions, Jhontu turned up at the gates of SK Babu's palatial mansion in Alipore with news of upcoming labour unrest or changes in competitors, offering street-smart advice on how to turn these issues to their company's advantage, which made SK Babu sit up and take further notice of him.

Jhontu moved up the chain of command swiftly in the next few years, while assiduously educating himself in night classes organised by SK Babu, who saw in this young man a powerful and sophisticated weapon of enforcement in the disorganised and unstable construction business.

Jhontu also used SK Babu's resources to build on his old Party connections, from which he benefited smartly, whether through advance notice on legislation or on routing and logistics of the upcoming Metro rail or even prior access to striking workers. On his part, Jhontu ensured that all the relevant palms were greased, meticulously recording details down to the serial numbers of notes, to ensure that SK Babu always had full and transparent information.

In the normal course Jhontu would no doubt have continued his growth in the construction industry as an able field manager, enriching his family and friends and in time building his own coterie of enforcers.

But Fate had something else in mind.

It was in the autumn of 1984 when the short-lived autumn was ceding ground to a gently incoming winter that Jhontu Ghosh's life became forever and inextricably intertwined with the Aggrawal family's.

They were travelling to the airport on Delhi's Outer Ring Road after a successful meeting with senior Government bureaucrats when the news of Indira Gandhi's assassination broke out. Unbeknownst to the little travelling party, havoc broke out across the city and their black Mercedes was set upon by a rampaging mob who were stopping traffic and attacking wealthy car owners, their passions further inflamed by the sight of SK Babu's customary pagri.

Smashing windows with steel pipes and pushing their arms in to wrench doors open, the jeering, screaming crowd hauled SK Babu and his driver out. SK Babu's daughter Sangeeta, who had accompanied him for this important meeting, vainly tried clinging to him to keep him in the car, pleading hysterically as the mob overwhelmed her.

In his normal front seat next to the driver, Jhontu's street fighting instincts immediately took over. He manoeuvred desperately to get into the driver's seat while fending off the grasping hands reaching inside the car, slashing destructively with the flick knife he always carried; as he fell into the driving seat, he slammed down his foot, flooring the accelerator. The big, expensive car responded with a roar of urgency, barrelling brutally through the crowd to emerge to a clear road ahead. The howling mob set off after them, but the car easily lost them in the rear view mirror, leaving them panting helplessly as they gave up the chase.

A few kilometers after reversing their direction, Jhontu turned into the posh old colony of Hauz Khas Enclave, with Sangeeta still hysterically shrieking in the back seat. The car stuttered to a standstill as he dragged up the handbrake and turned to reason with Sangeeta.

But she was well beyond words at that stage. As her crazed, unresponding eyes swivelled past him in a paroxysm of fear, her hands hammered the seats; deaf to his entreaties, she continued sobbing and screaming between long shuddering breaths.

Jhontu continued trying to calm her down for a few minutes, then reached a decision and sharply slapped her twice across her face. Sangeeta was suddenly shocked into a whimpering, hiccupping silence as he dragged her by the arm and knocked repeatedly on the nearest door, which was opened after a while by a protective middle aged man holding a hockey stick, with his teenaged sons behind him.

Jhontu roughly thrust the shivering Sangeeta at them “There has been a violent riot” he rasped.

The householder nodded slowly, taking in the wild eyed, expensively dressed girl and the tall, intense young man with blood on his arms and ripped shirt, with the badly damaged Mercedes on the road.

“Please look after her, she is at breaking point” Jhontu continued “I have to go...”

Then Jhontu turned to run back for SK Babu.

The mob had raged on and flowed away towards a new target, but there were smaller angry groups of men armed with a motley assortment of rods, sticks, swords and hockey sticks roaming the roads. They all gave the tall muscular man with bloody arms a wide berth as he half walked half jogged down the Outer Ring Road, calling out for SK Babu. Jhontu finally found him lying in half in a gutter after almost two hours, the



older man's right arm and several ribs broken, his rotund torso leaking blood from multiple gashes.

Jhontu did not stop to think whether he would exacerbate any internal wounds; he picked up the battered older man and carried him down the road on his back till he found an autorickshaw to drive them through inside roads to the AIIMS. SK Babu had lost a great deal of blood and was in intense agony, but the seasoned old veteran was not done yet. Going in and out of consciousness, he still clung stubbornly to life through the dangerous, bumpy ride, through several hours of surgery and through months of recuperative therapy thereafter to recover to full strength in less than a year after the horrific incident.

Sangeeta was SK Babu's only child, the apple of his eye and the sole heir to his entire fortune. SK Babu and his wife had made great plans for their talented young daughter, who had received the best education possible from the prestigious Loretto College in Calcutta topped off with an Economics degree from the London School of Economics. They wanted her to marry into another, equally or preferably even more powerful Marwari family so as to join the two businesses and strengthen the standing of both families, while of course adding a firm male hand on the tiller of SK Babu's own business interests.

Sangeeta had always been completely in tune with her parents. The only thing was, they had not accounted for this dramatic turn of events which would turn their lives upside down.

After surviving the trauma of the mob, Sangeeta not only felt she owed Jhontu her life, she was in fact overcome by a schoolgirl adoration of his strength and courage; so much so that she became completely obsessed with Jhontu, with her feelings only being strengthened by her parents' disapproval.

“He saved me, this man risked his own life to save me from rape and murder – why does that not matter to you?” she would emotionally throw back at her parents as they remonstrated with her “Papa is alive only because of Jhontu, but you don’t care, you don’t care! You are only worried about the opinions of strangers!!”

SK Babu was in his heart already beholden to Jhontu and admired the young man, although more as an exceptional employee rather than as a family member. But this place in his heart for Jhontu played its part, as after a few months of intense debate within the wider family where Sangeeta’s resolve showed no signs of weakening, SK Babu gave in despite the horrified protestations of his wife and family, and married Sangeeta off to Jhontu.

It was a lavish and traditional affair, attended by business and political luminaries from Bengal and as far afield as Dhaka, Delhi and Mumbai. But there were also many powerful and conservative Marwari families who chose to stay away; and there was a malicious whisper campaign about Sangeeta marrying in desperation below her station in life, which greatly saddened SK Babu, but never deterred him for a moment.

Despite the many challenges leading up to their marriage, the newlyweds enjoyed their honeymoon in exotic Singapore (lovingly arranged by SK Babu) and upon returning, quickly settled into their own unique rhythm.

For the first few years, Jhontu threw himself during the day into managing the increased responsibility which came his way as the heir apparent to SK Babu’s business, while Sangeeta invested every evening educating him about social niceties, global economic views, national and Bengali political themes, art, fine dining and a myriad other things which were as natural to her upbringing as they were new and alien to Jhontu.

He on his part gratefully saw her as the opportunity of a lifetime and was careful and gentle with her, but still primitive and sexual as he was with all women, which seemed to suit Sangeeta, who responded passionately. And their union bore fruit within a year in the form of their first daughter Vaidehi.

The construction business prospered tremendously under Jhontu, although stories abounded about intimidation of small landowners and payoffs to senior government officials. Other instances when Jhontu's primal instincts led to his fists talking were quickly and expensively hushed up, sometimes needing the intervention of SK Babu himself as a trusted elder statesman. It seemed that Jhontu's insatiable hunger for success and his natural street instincts always perched him on the edge of violence.

Sangeeta and Jhontu were blessed with a second daughter, Brinda, two years later. This time Jhontu had been keenly looking forward to a son and was visibly disappointed; but he was nevertheless dutiful and present throughout the birth and the weeklong ceremonies that followed, smiling through the celebrations before slipping off back to his work, leaving Sangeeta starting to feel a bit alone.

The truth was that Jhontu's success felt incomplete.

Even as his commercial success multiplied, Jhontu found to his chagrin that a number of doors still remained implacably closed to him. He was not always invited to all the major weddings that SK Babu continued to be warmly welcomed at; he sat two rows behind business owners and professional corporate leaders in Industry Body and Chambers of Commerce events; he knocked on a number of doors but unfortunately couldn't even find proposers and seconders to support his bid for membership of the posh Calcutta Club or Bengal Club... all of which meant that he continued to remain an outsider to the core business community in the city and the state, an outlier in terms of informal information, always

struggling to access the biggest and most lucrative contracts, tolerated by the best families but never fully a part of their lives.

In the early days, it did not bother him as he did not even understand or recognise the gap for what it was. He invested all his considerable energies into building the business that SK Babu was slowly handing over to him. But as time progressed and his understanding of his new world grew deeper, Jhontu began to chafe at the chasm between him and Sangeeta's social peer group. Try as he might, he knew that he had limitations of language, education and birth which would never fully enable him to fit in with the privileged wealthy families whose children were born into it – but as he began to appreciate the difference that birth made, he became increasingly optimistic that maybe the next generation of his family would be able to break down these invisible barriers.

He knew daughters could not unlock the doors of this elusive, male dominated world which was just out of his reach. So Jhontu started to privately obsess about having a son through whom his own standing could be legitimised.

He had nurtured great hopes when Sangeeta became pregnant for the second time, but it was not to be. After their second daughter was born, he became started to become progressively more impatient, consulting the best known doctors in the field and putting Sangeeta through multiple medical examinations; he even visited religious shrines and tried a number of absurd and challenging sexual positions advised by quacks and charlatans in his bid to sire a male heir. Many a times, Sangeeta watched fearfully as his brooding, morose silence turned into violent breakages of crockery and household knick knacks and sometimes into an open handed slap for an unfortunate male servant, so it was with as much relief as happiness that she welcomed a third child into the world after another almost three years - their son Rishaan.

Rishaan was a sweet, gentle, and obedient child from his very infancy. With his father's hazel eyes, his mother's fair complexion and his own unique dimpled smile, he charmed their family and friends and especially was irresistible to ladies of all ages from SK Babu's wife and his doting grandmother to his little sisters. Born into wealth and privilege, he was also blessed with empathy for the less fortunate, a good natured child who was kind to everyone he knew, without exception.

SK Babu himself was overjoyed about his grandson. "I love you both so much" he told his two little grand daughters who clutched his hands tightly as they welcomed Rishaan and Sangeeta home from the hospital "But now, our family is truly complete!"

There was a lavish celebration to commemorate this advent of a male heir, followed by exceptional arrangements for the little child, including an absurdly expensive English nanny, imported all the way from Hong Kong.

No expense was spared in little Rishaan's upbringing, as both his father and his grandfather were raising him to succeed in an increasingly competitive world.

Through his many contacts SK Babu secured Rishaan's admission into the most prestigious school in the city - La Martiniere College. Whether he was keen on it or not, Rishaan found himself participating in every activity considered appropriate at school and in the various clubs where his parents and grandparents were members - he rode, swam, played cricket, squash and the guitar, tried out for the debate team, joined the Mock UN, studied hard.

He was never a laggard and generally got on well with the inhabitants of all the different worlds he was asked to straddle. But the thing was, he was never at the forefront of any of these activities, though, seemingly competent but never quite mustering the intensity to challenge the best.

Jhontu was extremely proud at first and watched fondly from a distance, but started to get more involved and pushed Rishaan harder as he grew older. He knew his son was spared the many hard knocks he had suffered in his own childhood, but he was ambivalent about whether that was a good thing as Rishaan seemed to lack the edge that had served his father so well.

Jhontu desperately wanted his son to excel, although he didn't know quite how to inspire or motivate him, especially in a privileged world that had been denied to him in his own childhood. So he fell back on the only heavy handed discipline that he knew. Many a night during his teens Rishaan went to bed nursing a swollen cheek or ears or a heavily bruised arm as his father's desperation tipped over the edge of violence.

“Baba loves you very much, my dearest” Sangeeta would console her sniffling son, stroking his head “He is just worried about you, you know” she would say, trying to explain away her husband's brutal behaviour to the frightened little boy.

Rishaan graduated in the top half of his class, which was unfortunately not good enough for elite Indian colleges in Delhi or Calcutta. Jhontu used all his wealth and resources to research overseas colleges and with the guidance of the now ailing but still powerful SK Babu and the best counsellors and tutors that money could buy, Rishaan eventually went off to the prestigious New York University to study journalism – not the course anyone would have chosen, but it was NYU after all.

In his freshman semester, Rishaan abruptly discovered the joys of breathtaking, unsupervised freedom. Of course he wrote dutifully home to his parents about the many people he met and the many new things he experienced, but he did not, could not explain everything that happened to him.

Like the headstrong, beautiful and creative Kiara Williams, half English, half Austrian and fully wild.

And that is when his life changed.

It was instant attraction for both of them. Kiara opened Rishaan's senses to a whole new adventurous, sensory world, taking him rock climbing, to underground music concerts, introducing him to his first stick of marijuana and making love to him in shadow shifting firelight on the beach.... her exciting presence in his young life imbued Rishaan with an exhilarating self-confidence he'd never experienced before.

In his second semester, Rishaan slowly started to write about Kiara in emails and on WhatsApp to his now much married sisters and his mother, hesitantly at first and more adoringly as time went by, even talking blushing about her when he Skyped them “She is amazing.... Everything that I am not, you know Ma. She is so worldly wise, quite fearless, so uninhibited, she is making me a different person!” he would say, causing his mother and sisters to exchange a flurry of worried messages between themselves in the background, while lovingly asking him to be careful.

Notwithstanding his excitement, Rishaan always remained deeply conscious of his father's expectations, so while sharing Kiara with the three adoring women in his life, he exhorted them all the while not to tell Jhontu.

And knowing Jhontu as they did, hoping that Rishaan's infatuation would blow over, they faithfully kept his secret.

Around the time that Rishaan had gone to college, the winds of political change had begun to blow in Bengal. Ever the opportunist, Jhontu had spotted the chance to rebuild his image, and had relentlessly courted the upcoming opposition with all the wealth and the muscle power at his disposal. During a discreet conclave at the opposition leader's home, Jhontu found himself seated for several hours next to one of her staunchest followers, cement baron OP Sisodia, with whom he struck up a comfortable rapport as the evening progressed, which carried over into subsequent gatherings.

Whether the brains trust of the Opposition had conspired with SK Babu to plan this coming together or not, Jhontu was deeply gratified with this burgeoning friendship because the old money Sisodias were practically Calcutta nobility; and because it was the first time he had been thus acknowledged outside of work.

As the opposition came into power in the next elections, Jhontu's business empire grew discreetly more powerful in a few shared projects with the Sisodias. His personal friendship with the OP Sisodia deepened, they along with SK Babu began to meet more frequently at each others' family functions until one day, SK Babu gently pronounced "My friends, I am now in the evening of my life..." as the gathered family member demurred he waved an affectionate hand and continued "Oh yes, it has been a great journey and I have done most things I wanted. Now, before I go, it is my dearest wish to see the OP's granddaughter Diya married to my grandson Rishaan" SK babu finished the little speech he had rehearsed with Jhontu.

OP Sisodia stood up with portentous gravity and warmly embraced SK Babu in agreement; and the matter was decided.

However, to give the young ones a sense of control over their own destiny which seemed to be what they wanted nowadays, both the families lovingly plotted to throw Rishaan and Diya together at the upcoming Sisodia family destination wedding in Goa before the big announcement to their family and friends.

Rishaan was devastated when his mother told him he had to meet Diya at the wedding.

"Come on, Ma" he had burst out when Sangeeta spoke to him "You know I have planned this whitewater rafting holiday in Rishikesh for all my US college mates? You know that Kiara is coming for the first time? How can I cancel all of that? It will be so awful to ditch so many people!"



He argued with his mother several times and complained to his sisters, but in the end he reluctantly agreed, as they had all known he would.

He still didn't know how to be honest with his father.

Rishaan was indeed deeply disappointed, but through long years of practice he was able to play off Sangeeta's guilt by negotiating concessions from her – the big one being that their family home would host all his US friends before they travelled to Rishikesh and that he could travel to Goa a couple of days later than the rest of the marriage party. Sangeet in turn cannily extracted from him the promise that he would come a few days early to Calcutta to meet family friends - including the Sisodias and especially Diya.

When they finally did meet, Diya took Rishaan's breath away. She was petite, ethereal, highly adventurous and to his utter surprise, already and candidly completely smitten with him - she confessed she'd had a crush on him since she had been in middle school. Rishaan was fully prepared to be aloof and distant, but when Diya cuddled up to him on the darkened verandah and confidentially shared scandalous stories of how she had nearly ruined the family's reputation in her first year of studies at Warwick university in the UK and followed it up with a warm, lingering goodnight kiss, his pre-decided resistance started to crumble a little bit.

The wedding group departed for Goa the next day, with Rishaan's college friends arriving en masse a few hours later. After a couple of nights of partying and painting Kolkata red, Rishaan was at the airport, charming the check in clerk to print Kiara's boarding pass while she was in the toilet, when he was disconcerted to suddenly find Diya and her dimpled smile behind him, asking for the seat next to his.

She had apparently changed her flight to travel with him.

She was somewhat taken aback when Rishaan accepted a Business Class boarding pass for the window seat next to his aisle seat, but she quietly accepted the seat across the aisle.

Sometime through the flight, a still hungover Kiara woke up to go to the washroom again. When she returned, she was too was not too happy to find that Rishaan had in her absence offered her window seat to Diya, who was keen to enjoy the vista of the sun dappled ocean as the giant airborne ship began its graceful descent towards Goa. With about half an hour still remaining for the flight to land, a sleep starved Kiara took another power nap, this time holding Rishaan's right hand possessively across the aisle. Rishaan's dutifully curled around Kiara's strong fingers, but his other hand, though, nervously moved to touch Diya's. She looked down at his hand, a little confused by his moodiness, but did not push it away.

When the flight landed in the sweltering midday heat at Dabolim Airport in Goa, Rishaan went through the airport formalities in an absent minded manner. He had been looking forward to exploring Goa with Kiara, but now he felt he was being torn in different directions.

Diya had by this time recovered her poise. She chatted animatedly during the airport procedures, then sat next to Rishaan on the limousine to the hotel, relegating a sulky Kiara to the front seat next to the driver. Rishaan found himself responding warmly, even affectionately to Diya, recognising an amazing number of common interests and shared history in Diya's words, which kept him thoroughly engaged.

Diya stayed besides him through the hotel check in and happily joined him as the receptionist showed him to his room. As the door closed, Diya stepped in and linked her arm through his "I know that this has been set up Rishaan, but I'm getting a really good feeling about whole alliance" she confided in him cheerfully.

Before he could respond, there was a knock on the open door. Rishaan looked up to find Kiara on the threshold, along with a bellboy carrying the rest of their bags. She took in the scene with narrowed eyes and reacted in her usual mercurial manner "What the hell is happening here Rishaan? Why did you leave me in the lobby by myself? Why are encouraging this rich bitch to paw you all over?"

Rishaan jerked away nervously from Diya and shook his head "You really shouldn't speak that way" he told Kiara.

Diya stepped in closer, suddenly concerned "What happened Rishaan? Have I upset you? I wasn't just talking about the business synergies, I was talking about our relationship" she said in a gentle, lowered tone as she affectionately placed her palms on his chest.

Kiara looked on in disbelief and flung her backpack to the ground with a thump. "What is wrong with you Rishaan?" she burst out, her voice rising several decibels, almost hysterical now "Are you going to be bought by her money, like a farm animal?! Is that what you brought me all this way to see?"

Rishaan turned away and shook his head violently, his emotions churning.

Divya spontaneously followed him and stepped in close with her head on his chest, to soothe and comfort him.

At that, Kiara went crazy, suddenly lunging at them and shrieking at the top of her lungs "Get away from her! Get AWAY!!"

Rishaan reacted sharply to the uncontrolled rage in Kiara's voice, elbowing Diya away in a violent gesture. Her arms flailed wildly for balance as she tottered back, stumbled over his bags on the floor and smashed down hard on the glass topped table.

Rishaan stopped for a moment, then nervously took a step toward Diya. His knees suddenly buckled as he saw her

sightless eyes and the thick, jagged shard of glass embedded in the back of her head as she lay motionless in a spreading pool of blood.

An hour later the room was a grim place, filled with people. The grief stricken Sisodias were weeping inconsolably next to Diya's tarpaulin covered body, police detectives were questioning all the relatives one at a time, while uniformed constables protected the crime scene and hotel security ensured everything remained intact.

Rishaan was curled up on the bed, shivering uncontrollably despite the heat, clinging childishly to Sangeeta's hands while Jhontu and a frail SK Babu conferred with the Assistant Commissioner of Police overseeing the investigation.

“Where is this Kiara person?” demanded Jhontu in a pent up, low, intense voice “Why haven't you questioned her yet? She can confirm what Rishaan said!”

Rishaan started making a low, moaning sound as he sat up and hugged his knees, rocking gently.

The senior policemen looked at him with a strange expression and turned back to Jhontu “We have checked with everyone, Mr Ghosh – you should know that there is no such person.”

That is when Rishaan started screaming.

He was still screaming, his eyes rolling wildly, spittle flying from his open slack mouth as they strapped him into a white coat and dragged him to the lift.

## Ranjan Sen

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Ranjan was born and raised in Calcutta. After reading Economics and completing an MBA from Delhi University, Ranjan spent three decades with major international banks in leadership roles across multiple countries and functions. He stepped back now to pursue a newfound passion in Angel Investing and to return to his first love - writing. His short stories have been previously published in prestigious journals like 'Kitaab' and 'The Thieving Magpie.'

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