



VIMAL HAD A GROWING SUSPICION that he was being watched. He'd felt it ever since he left the garage on Mirza Ismail Road.

He had read in the paper about the Bikaner Bank truck being found near Phulera, and had decided immediately that it would be dangerous to stay in Jaipur even a moment longer.

Once he'd been released from the holding cell at the police station, he had rushed directly to his garage. He had packed a few essentials into a small suitcase and set out, mentally bidding farewell to the garage he was leaving behind.

He was wearing his skintight shirt with the wide collar. On the back it had a picture of a closed fist with the middle finger pointing upwards, with the words UP YOURS emblazoned in an arc below it. On his head he wore a cap with PEACE embroidered in a circle on the front. Slung around his neck was a brass pendant that read MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. The blue contact lenses were in his eyes, and, as an added measure, he was wearing wire-framed clear glass spectacles.

He had maybe twenty-two hundred rupees in his pocket. Two thousand of that was Bikaner Bank loot, in hundred-rupee notes, which could be dangerous to spend in the city. But for now he had no other money.

There was no way he could get back the forty-eight thousand rupees he'd entrusted to Alberto. Alberto was in the hospital—it would be risky even to go there. In any case, Alberto didn't have the money with him, and he was in no shape to get to it.

Vimal's current hippie getup had always protected him in the past. He had assumed it was still effective—but unless his suspicions were unfounded, someone had recognized him in spite of the disguise, and was trailing him.

He kept walking.

He reached the junction of Mirza Ismail Road and Bhagwandas Road just as a local bus got there. The bus slowed down at the roundabout, and Vimal leapt in.

He felt a sense of relief that no one had climbed into the bus after him. Of course, if someone *was* following him, all he would have to do now was follow the bus.

Vimal glanced behind him. It was rush hour, so the road was packed—besides all the cars, rickshaws, tongas, Tempos, and cycles, it was teeming with pedestrians. If there was someone after him, it would be impossible to tell in this crowd.

“Ticket!”

Vimal, startled, turned towards the voice. The bus conductor was standing in front of him.

“Yes, give me one.”

“Where to?”

Vimal hadn't thought about it. “Where does this bus go?”

“Arrey, saheb, tell me, where do you want to go?”

“Does this bus go to the railway station?”

“It does.”

“One ticket for the station, then,” Vimal said. He offered the conductor a one-rupee note.

The conductor handed him his ticket and change, and elbowed his way ahead. Vimal remained standing, close to the door.

The bus reached the busy crossroads near the railway station. As it slowed down to turn, Vimal jumped off. He rushed towards Sawai Jaisingh Road.

After a few steps, he paused to look back. He couldn't see anyone paying attention to him, nor did he recognize anyone from the crowd on Mirza Ismail Road.

Something was definitely wrong, though. The warning bells in his head had to be ringing for a reason. Ever since he'd escaped from Allahabad, he'd been living such a dangerous life that he had come to rely on his premonitions of peril.

But even if someone *was* following him, what did that person want?

If it was a cop, he would have nabbed him by now.

Who, then?

Perhaps someone who suspected that Vimal was a wanted criminal. After all, there was a reward of fifty thousand rupees for his arrest.

He kept walking, his sense of jeopardy intensifying.

Suddenly a car passed, close to him, and then stopped just ahead at the footpath in front of the Rajasthan State Hotel. A woman got out and walked into the hotel compound.

Vimal noticed that she hadn't bothered to lock the car. As he came closer, he saw that the keys were still in the ignition.

He didn't hesitate for a second.

He opened the front door of the car. Throwing his suitcase onto the passenger seat, he got in and sat behind the steering wheel. He turned the ignition, pressed the clutch and put the car in gear. Then he slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

The car bounded ahead with a jerk.

He didn't hear any commotion behind him. Apparently the owner hadn't noticed her car being stolen.

Before the car had gone a hundred metres, Vimal had put it into fourth gear and pushed it to its top speed.

Working as a motor mechanic here in Jaipur for so long had made him a good driver, at least.

At the next turn, he swung the car left towards Ajmer Road at such speed that the right wheels rose into the air. The car straightened out immediately and shot like a cannonball down the road. It was a new Ambassador, with a powerful engine under the hood.

He turned onto Ashok Road and glanced in the rear-view mirror.

Now he was sure there was someone after him.

A black Fiat had turned onto Ashok Road at the same furious speed. He caught a glimpse of the driver and another man sitting next to him.

Vimal turned his car towards the Income Tax Office, then, passing through Lajpat Road, turned onto Malviya Road.

Now he was going back in the direction he'd come from.

The black Fiat was still there. Whether they were undercover police or just after him for the reward, they were after him for sure. He had to shake them off.

His car reached the junction. He turned left at full speed towards Sardar Patel Road. Then he slammed the accelerator to the floor. He had no option now; he had to take the risk.

Manoeuvring through the narrow, empty roads around Residency Rajmahal, he got to Bhavani Singh Road. There he turned right.

The railway crossing was just ahead. The gate was closed. His heart sank.

He looked back nervously.

Behind him, the black Fiat crossed the junction and turned onto Bhavani Singh Road.

By now, Vimal had slowed down and stopped right in front of the railway crossing gate. It was impossible to turn back. And the gate didn't look like it would open any time soon.

He was trapped. He turned to look behind him once more.

The black Fiat was heading straight for him.

Moving quickly, he grabbed the handle of his suitcase, opened the car door with his free hand, and rushed through the narrow opening at the side of the railway gate towards the track.

He saw the train approaching from the right. He was still some distance away from the track. There was no way he could make it across before the train came.

The black Fiat had almost reached the crossing. The train's engine screamed as it hurtled past in front of him.

The Fiat screeched to a stop next to the Ambassador.

The bogies of the train were rattling by in front of him. Instinctively, Vimal broke into a run alongside the train. The train had slowed down, but not so much that it would be easy to jump on.

Both front doors of the black Fiat opened at the same time. Two men came out and rushed towards the crossing gate.

Vimal grabbed hold of the handle next to a bogie door and leapt onto the step. He winced as he was yanked forward, but he didn't let his hand lose its grip on the handle or his foot slip off the step, and he held tightly to the suitcase with his other hand.

The train began to pick up speed. Vimal turned to look back.

The two men were still standing by the railway crossing, looking on helplessly. The last bogie of the train went past them. Neither of them had tried to get onto the train after him.

“Wahe Guru sacche Paatshah,” Vimal murmured. “You are my God, Protector of all!”