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THE KRISHNA KEY

Ashwin Sanghi's first novel, *The Rozabal Line*, was self-published in 2007 under his pseudonym, Shawn Haigins. The theological thriller based upon the theory that Jesus died in Kashmir was subsequently published by Westland in 2008 in India under his own name and went on to become a bestseller, remaining

on national bestseller lists for several months. Ashwin Sanghi's second novel, *Chanakya's Chant*, a political thriller with roots in ancient Mauryan history, shot to the top of almost every bestseller list in India within a few weeks of its launch. The novel went on to win the Crossword-Vodafone Popular Choice Award 2010, and film producer UTV acquired the movie rights to the book. The novel continues to dominate the fiction charts.

The Krishna Key, Ashwin's third novel, is a furiously paced and riveting thriller that explores the ancient secrets of the Vedic age and the *Mahabharata*.

Ashwin is an entrepreneur by profession but writing historical fiction in the thriller genre is his passion and hobby. Ashwin was educated at the Cathedral & John Connon School, Mumbai, and St Xavier's College, Mumbai. He holds a masters degree from Yale and is working towards a Ph.D. in Creative Writing. Ashwin lives in Mumbai with his wife, Anushika, and his son, Raghuvir.

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ASHWIN SANGHI

THE KRISHNA KEY



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am obliged to my wife Anushika and my son Raghuvir, who ungrudgingly tolerated my persistent absence from their lives while I was writing this book. They are my inspiration, my life and my very breath. I am beholden to my parents, Mahendra and Manju, who supported me in all my endeavours, including my writing. Also, many thanks to my brother and sister, Vaibhav and Vidhi, who picked up the slack, at work, and at home, while I was working on this project.

My aunt, Aparna Gupta, is my eternal friend and guide, but has never hesitated to critique my work. I am thankful to her for playing the role of sounding-board while this novel was a work in progress.

I am grateful to my editor, Prita Maitra, and my publisher, Gautam Padmanabhan, without whom none of my novels, including this one, would have emerged from their manuscripts. In addition, I am thankful to Paul Vinay Kumar, Renuka Chatterjee, Anushree Banerjee and Satish Sundaram at Westland who have always supported me wholeheartedly. Gunjan Ahlawat and Kunal Kundu deserve special mention for the beautiful cover design as also Vipin Vijay for putting it all together. My thanks to Rupesh Talaskar for the illustrations inside the pages of this novel. My gratitude, also, to Vishwajeet Sapan for the key Sanskrit translations.

v

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I am thankful to various authors and producers of original or derived works. A separate acknowledgements section at the end of the narrative lists these in detail.

I am fortunate to be the grandson of the late Shri Ram Prasad Gupta and grandnephew of his brother, the late Shri Ram Gopal Gupta. Their blessings move

the fingers that hold my pen.
Finally, I am deeply aware of the fact that when
I sit down to write, the words that flow from mind to
matter are merely *through* me, not *from* me. How do
I convey my thanks to the real writer—the formless,
shapeless and endless Almighty—for his blessings?
Perhaps this book will answer that question.

vi

WARNING

This book uses several images to explain details within the story. Flipping to the back of the book prematurely may result in your inadvertently viewing some images that could act as plot-spoilers, hence this is not advised.

DISCLAIMER

This book is a work of fiction and should be read as such. No claim regarding historical accuracy is made expressly or implied. All names, characters, places and incidents used in this book are the product of the author's imagination. Historical, religious or mythological characters; historical or legendary events; or names of places are always used fictitiously. Best efforts have been made to attribute historical, mythological or theological material at the back of this book in the Acknowledgements & References section. Any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, past events or historical locations, is entirely coincidental. Images and maps are for illustrative purposes only and are presented without any claim to accuracy.

vii



MAP OF KINGDOMS DURING THE MAHABHARATA ERA

viii

*Who really knows, and who can swear,
How creation came, when or where!
Even gods came after creation's day,
Who really knows, who can truly say
When and how did creation start?
Did He will it? Or did He not?
Only He, up there, knows, maybe;
Or perhaps, not even He.*

—Rig Veda 10:129



THE KRISHNA KEY

1

Let me start at the very beginning... even before

I was born. One of my ancestors was King Yayati. He was cursed by the sage Shukracharya for having been unfaithful to his wife, Devayani, who was Shukracharya's daughter. The curse was that Yayati would grow old prematurely and thus be unable to enjoy the pleasures of his youth and potency. Later, Shukracharya relented and softened the blow: Yayati would be spared if one of his sons, Yadu or Puru, accepted the consequences of the curse. The older son, Yadu, refused, but the younger, Puru, agreed to take it on himself. As a reward, Yayati chose Puru to succeed him as king, in place of Yadu. The enraged Yayati enlarged upon the punishment to his elder son. 'Neither you nor your descendants will ever occupy a throne!' he prophesied, in a fury. The unlucky Yadu left his home and settled down in Mathura where his lineage flourished. Yadu's descendants were the Yadavas, of which I was one. Yadavas, since then, have been king-makers, but never kings. Puru went on to become the patriarch of the kingdom of Hastinapur—into which the families of the Kauravas and Pandavas were born.

1

ASHWIN SANGHI

Anil Varshney did not know that he had less than twelve minutes left to live. His modest house in the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan was deathly quiet at this hour except for the humming of the desert cooler. Varshney loved the silence. It allowed him to immerse himself entirely in the strange letterings and symbols that lay before him.

Work was meditation and prayer for India's youngest linguist and symbolist who had shot to instant fame when he succeeded in deciphering several ancient hieroglyphs from the Indus Valley civilisation. Fluent in over fifteen languages, Varshney had ten publications to his credit including the most widely used multilingual dictionary of Indian languages. He was to ancient writing systems what Bill Gates was to operating systems.

His living space was fashionably disorganised, reflective of the eclectic genius that inhabited it. The bedroom was rarely used because most of Varshney's life was spent at archaeological sites, particularly Kalibangan, the most important Indus Valley site in Rajasthan. His living room had no furniture except for a desk and a patterned-fabric couch that had seen better days. The bare floor was littered with

stacks of books, bundles of research papers, as well as cardboard boxes filled with the objects of Varshney's study—seals, pottery fragments, scrolls and parchments.

On the desk before him lay a small rectangular seal, around 20 x 20 mm, apparently made of conch shell. The seal had a square peg in the back. Strangely, the peg had no hole for inserting a ring into, as was usual with seals of this type. Three ancient animal

2

THE KRISHNA KEY

motifs of a bull, unicorn and goat were engraved in an anticlockwise direction on the face of the seal. And it was this frozen tableau that seemed to be the focus of Varshney's attention.

His desk was strewn with papers on which he had made sketches and scribbles. A notebook computer stood open on a corner of the desk, its screen-saver having been triggered an hour earlier. A brushed-steel desk lamp shone a single, wide beam of fluorescent white light on the seal and the papers surrounding it. Varshney, oblivious to everything else around him, was closely examining the images on the seal with a Carl Zeiss 20X magnifying glass.

Varshney's outward appearance was that of a geek: ill-fitting clothes, uncombed hair, and shirt pockets stuffed with a variety of Rotring Isograph pens. His face was blemished with mild eruptions of acne and his personal hygiene left a lot to be desired. But grooming, bathing and dressing were completely inconsequential in his world. Varshney had spent several years at various Indus Valley sites—including the recent one at Kalibangan—painstakingly creating a database of eight thousand semantic clusters from his lexicon of thirty Indian languages. For the first time since the excavations at Harappa in 1921, Varshney now seemed to have found a way to explain the strange hieroglyphs on over five thousand seals discovered at such locations.

Varshney was oblivious to his surroundings and did not observe the shaft of light falling on the floor that gradually widened as the main entrance door to his house was quietly opened, the lock having been expertly picked. He did not notice the beam of light

3

ASHWIN SANGHI

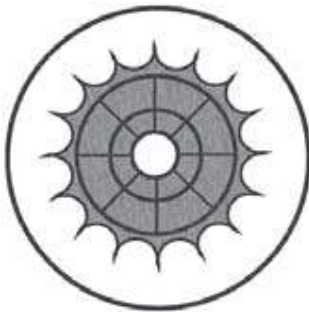
disappearing as the door was gently closed. He did not hear the quiet footsteps of light rubber soles on the ceramic-tiled floor, nor did he feel the breath of

the stranger on his neck. He only screamed when he saw the intruder's face reflected on his computer screen but by then it was too late. No sound emerged from Varshney's throat because the visitor had tightly clamped a chloroform-soaked handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

Paralysed with fear, Varshney struggled to lash out with his hands. The desk lamp fell crashing to the ground and suddenly his house went completely black. Varshney found his right arm being viciously twisted behind his back while the handkerchief retained its vice-like grip on his face. A searing pain shot up his arm, bringing tears to his eyes and momentarily stunning him. He could feel himself passing out as the chloroform slowly worked its way into his system. Soon, there was complete stillness—and silence.

The intruder effortlessly lifted the unconscious Varshney from his chair with his latex-gloved hands and placed him on the floor with his back upright against a wall and his legs stretched out before him. He unzipped the belt pack around his waist and took out a roll of duct tape with which he efficiently gagged his prisoner. He then proceeded to bind his captive's hands behind his back with some more tape. With almost choreographed movements, the assailant delved into his waist bag and took out a little self-inking rubber stamp. He placed the rubber end of the stamp on Varshney's forehead. The resultant image on his victim's forehead was of a small, crimson, wheel enclosed within a circle.

4



THE KRISHNA KEY

With Varshney still unconscious, the attacker quickly surveyed his victim's inventory of ancient artefacts. He ignored everything except the three-headed animal seal that had been Varshney's object of attention prior to the attack. He took out a small plastic specimen bag, placed the seal in it and then placed the object back into his waist bag. Where were the other three?

Knowing that the seal was one of a set of four, he searched the living space meticulously for the remaining ones, along with the base plate that he knew was meant to hold the four seals together. Each cardboard box was minutely examined, desk drawers were opened, and even the sofa cushions were ripped open. Coming up empty-handed, the assailant muttered a curse under his breath. 'Damn!'

Resigned to an only partial victory and having surveyed his handiwork, he took out a Swann-Morton scalpel that had been custom-engraved with the initials 'R.M.' from his belt bag, bent down over Varshney's comatose body and with surgical precision thrust the scalpel into the sole of Varshney's left foot, leaving it embedded in the flesh. It gashed through an artery. Blood spurted out while Varshney—still unconscious—began his long and agonising march towards death.

5



ASHWIN SANGHI

The killer next took out a paintbrush from his belt pack. He gently dipped it into the puddle of blood that had formed around Varshney's left foot and began to write, with the air of a calligrapher, on the wall above Varshney's head:

*Mleccha-nivaha-nidhane kalayasi karavalam
dhumaketum iva kim api karalam
kesava dhrita-kalki-sarira jaya jagadisa hare.*

2

Now let me tell you a little bit about my parents. Ugrasena was the benevolent chieftain of Mathura, but his son Kansa—who was my maternal uncle—was a rogue. The only being Kansa seemed to care about was his sister Devaki, my mother. Devaki had just married my father Vasudeva, a prince from a neighbouring kingdom and the son of Shurasena, a descendant of Yadu. The newlyweds were about to leave Mathura and Kansa was heartbroken to see his sister leave. On impulse, he decided to play charioteer so that he could spend more time with her. They had barely travelled a few miles when a booming voice from the heavens mocked Kansa. 'You fool! Devaki's eighth son is destined to kill you and you shed

crocodile tears over her departure?’

6

THE KRISHNA KEY

Ravi Mohan Saini surveyed the classroom and smiled at his doctoral student, Priya Ratnani, seated in the last row, before dimming the lights. The nineteen other students besides Priya were part of the master’s programme in ancient Indian history. The students allowed themselves to relax. A presentation usually meant that Saini would not have time to single out any of them to answer tricky questions.

Just a couple of months over forty-five, Ravi Mohan Saini was one of the stars at St Stephen’s College in New Delhi. He taught that most interesting course in the university, the History of Mythology. Besides the fact that he had a BA from Oxford and a PhD from the University of Memphis, what made him one of the most popular professors was his easy-going nature and dashing good looks. Just a little under six feet tall, Saini had been blessed with godlike physical charms—swarthy features, well-proportioned limbs, toned muscles, an unblemished complexion and wavy hair. He rarely paid any attention to his grooming but his two-day stubble only seemed to enhance his sex appeal to the starry-eyed young women who hogged the front row at his lectures. He was the exact opposite of the geeky Anil Varshney—his closest friend in school. It had never ceased to amaze their teachers that the two of them were such close friends. The first PowerPoint slide came up. Wordlessly, it simply showed a night sky filled with an assortment of stars. ‘Confused?’ asked Saini. ‘Don’t worry. You’re not in Astronomy-101. What you see before you is merely a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran.’ Before any questions could be asked, he quickly clicked his remote presentation pointer and advanced to the next slide, which was equally mysterious.

7

ASHWIN SANGHI

‘What we have here is another important planetary formation—retrograde Mars before reaching Antares,’ continued Saini, amused by the bewildered expressions on his students’ faces that were dimly visible from the light reflected off the presentation screen. Happy to string his students on a little further, he quickly advanced to the third and final slide. ‘A lunar eclipse near Pleiades—or the Seven Sisters,’ he announced perfunctorily, before switching off the projection system, and brightening the classroom

lights. The reprieve had been short lived.

‘There are many who believe that the *Mahabharata* is a myth. Indeed, many of you view the epic as a collection of stories based upon wisdom of the ages but you do not see it as an actual historical event. Well, we’re going to change your assumptions today,’ announced Saini.

Sitting in the last row, Priya chuckled at the collective surprise this generated. She was completing her doctoral dissertation on the historicity of the *Mahabharata* under Saini’s tutelage and had been through the material beforehand.

Saini continued. ‘In the *Mahabharata*, it is said that Sage Vyasa, its author, met Dhritarashtra, the father of the one hundred Kaurava princes, on the eve of the great war and warned him of the terrible planetary omens that he had seen. One of the omens was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran; another was retrograde Mars before reaching Antares; and yet a third was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades. The very three conjunctions that I just showed you,’ said Saini. There was a stunned silence as his students digested this information.

8

THE KRISHNA KEY

Seeing an arm shoot up, he paused and nodded at the student. ‘So what were the slides you showed us?’ asked the sceptical young man. ‘Simulations of ancient night skies or photographs of modern equivalents?’

Saini smiled. ‘Very good question. The slides you saw were computer simulations using a software that recreates the skies as they would have been observed from Kurukshetra—the scene of the epic battle—on any given day of any given year in history. We need to thank Professor Narhari Achar from my alma mater, the University of Memphis, for his path-breaking research into this topic. Professor Achar searched for all the years in which there was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran and found one hundred and thirty-seven such conjunctions in history. He then searched for those dates on which Mars was retrograde before reaching Antares. This resulted in just seventeen overlapping dates. Finally, he searched for those dates on which there was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades and was left with just a single date on which all three astronomical events happened simultaneously.’

Saini paused. He loved taking little breaks at the very moments when his students wanted him to

proceed further. 'From the exercise conducted by Professor Achar, it is evident that the Mahabharata war must have occurred in 3067 BCE—around five thousand years ago,' said Saini finally. Everyone in the classroom seemed too surprised to ask any follow-up questions. The only amused face was that of Priya, who continued to smile silently. She knew that the good professor was bang on target.



ASHWIN SANGHI

3

I'm told that Kansa was furious when he heard the voice from the heavens. Grabbing Devaki by her hair, he pulled out his sword to chop off her head just as my father Vasudeva fell at Kansa's feet. 'If the prophecy is true then you need not fear Devaki. It's her eighth son that constitutes a risk to your life. Both Devaki and I are willing to be your prisoners and I shall personally deliver her eighth child to you, Kansa. Please spare Devaki. She is innocent,' he pleaded. Duly pacified, Kansa ordered his guards to take my father and mother back to Mathura and to securely lock them in prison. It is said that upon reaching Mathura, Kansa's furious father Ugrasena roared, 'What utter nonsense is this Kansa? Release Devaki and Vasudeva immediately for they are innocent. If you disobey me, I shall have you locked up!' Kansa laughed demonically. 'It is you who shall be in prison, old man. You've outlived your utility and your entire army is now personally loyal to me. Guards, arrest my useless father!' commanded Kansa. The guards seized the old and frail ruler and carted him off to prison to join my father and mother in the dungeons.

'You were wrong, Prof! It was two possible years—3067 BCE and 2183 BCE—that remained as viable alternatives for the Mahabharata war according to Achar's research,' said Priya as they sat in Saini's office sipping sugary milk tea.

10

THE KRISHNA KEY

Priya was just shy of forty and her athletic lifestyle was evident from the perfect figure that she managed

to maintain in spite of the occasional indulgences in sugary milk tea. Daughter of a famous lawyer, Priya had disappointed her father when she elected history over law as her metier. Educated at St Xavier's College, Mumbai, she had proceeded to King's College, London, for an MA in history. Returning to India, she had begun teaching before she tracked down Saini and persuaded him to accept her as a doctoral student so that she could develop a thesis on the historicity of Krishna and the events of the *Mahabharata*. Quick-witted, beautiful, energetic and intelligent, Priya was precisely the sort of distraction that Saini did *not* need. Saini's life was his work. He had loved someone once. He had even married her during his days at the University of Memphis. Five years later, they had drifted apart when they realised that the only exciting part of their lives had been the novelty and freshness of the relationship. Marriage seemed to have ruined it all. The divorce had been quick and painless but it had forced Saini to reengineer his life and move back to India.

'You are right Priya,' said Saini, 'but when one superimposes the information that Bhishma, the grand-uncle of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, died in the month of *Magha*—which occurs after the winter solstice—the only remaining date is 3067 BCE. This emerges as a unique date for the Mahabharata war.'

'But simply arriving at a possible date for the Mahabharata war does not prove that it happened,' countered Priya. Priya had the habit of playing devil's

11
ASHWIN SANGHI

advocate in order to analyse a point, even if she was in agreement with the hypothesis.

Saini was quick to rise to the challenge. 'Hence we must look outside the *Mahabharata* to see if any other sources can corroborate this date. Let's not rely on Indian sources and instead turn to Greek references, shall we? Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador in the court of Chandragupta Maurya, made the first written reference to Krishna. In his account, Krishna is called *Heracles*. The Greeks renamed many Indian deities after their own, and the Greek usage of the name Heracles was influenced by the term *Hari*, the common expression used for Krishna. Now what does Megasthenes tell us about Heracles? He writes that the *Souraseno*i held Heracles in high esteem. Who are these Souraseno

'If I'm not mistaken, the Sourasenoι were actually the *Shurasenas*—the Yadava descendants of Vasudeva's father, Shurasena. Krishna was a Yadava himself,' said Priya.

'Full marks to the backbencher,' joked Saini. He continued, 'Megasthenes goes on to describe their main city, *Methora*. Any guesses where Methora was?' '*Mathura*!' exclaimed Priya.

'Precisely!' said Saini. 'Krishna is recorded by the Greeks as having lived a hundred and thirty-eight generations before the times of Alexander and Chandragupta Maurya. We may take the midpoint of Chandragupta's reign as 307 BCE. Now, assuming twenty years per generation—which is a fairly good average where ancient Indian dynasties are involved—Krishna should have lived 2,760 years before 307 BCE.

12

THE KRISHNA KEY

Do the arithmetic! You'll end up with 3067 BCE, the very same date arrived at by Achar's astronomical observations!

Priya had a twinkle in her eyes. 'You're preaching to the choir, Professor. I was just testing you,' she said smiling.

Not quite convinced of her sincerity, Saini emphatically drove his point further. 'Just for some fun, let's also look at a third source, shall we?' he asked. 'The *Surya Siddhantha* is an ancient work on astronomy that provides the foundation for all Hindu and Buddhist calendars. This particular treatise tells us that at precisely midnight on 18 February in 3102 BCE, *Kaliyuga* began. As you know, Kaliyuga is the last of the four stages that the world goes through as part of the cycle of Yugas described in the Indian scriptures, the three previous ages being *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga* and *Dvaparayuga*. Hindus believe that human civilisation degenerates spiritually during the Kaliyuga—almost a Dark Age—because people get distanced from God.'

'How does the beginning of Kaliyuga tell us anything about the date of the Mahabharata war?' asked Priya mischievously, half-aware of the answer. Saini considered the question carefully before choosing his words. 'According to Hindu philosophy, the very first event to distance us from God was the death of Krishna. Krishna was an avatar of Vishnu and his passing away symbolically marked the dawn of Kaliyuga. If we believe the *Surya Siddhanta*, the Mahabharata war took place around 3067 BCE, not

2183 BCE.'

13

ASHWIN SANGHI

Priya nodded as she digested Saini's words and asked, 'Achar examined verses from various parts of the epic. One of his conclusions was that when Saturn is at Aldebaran it brings great bad tidings. Do you believe it?'

'Do you know the only other time in contemporary history when Saturn has been in Aldebaran?' asked Saini.

'No. When?'

'The last occurrence of Saturn in Aldebaran was on 11 September 2001—a date that we now remember as 9/11. Still have doubts?' asked Saini with a wry grin.

'If the Mahabharata war took place on a definite date and at a definite place, why is it that we have been unable to find any evidence of the existence of Krishna, the protagonist of the epic?' asked Priya, putting aside her sugary brew in disgust.

Saini shrugged. 'Lack of evidence does not imply lack of existence. In 1610 there was no evidence of the sun being at the centre of the solar system. Five years later, the Roman Inquisition tried Galileo for proposing such a preposterous theory. Did it mean that the solar system, as we know it today, did not exist? A few hundred years is all that it takes to accept new evidence. In the search for a historical Krishna, we are exactly where Galileo was in 1610—on the brink of a major discovery that the rest of the world has not yet accepted.'

Saini paused and then leaned forward and asked conspiratorially, 'What if I were to tell you that the Galileo moment has arrived?'

14



THE KRISHNA KEY

4

Kansa's reign of terror intensified after his self-elevation. Even the powerful sages were not spared. They prostrated themselves before the Devas who rushed to meet me at my home in Vaikuntha. 'Save the world from Kansa's pillage, O Lord Vishnu!' they pleaded before me. I opened my

eyes and calmly said 'Have no fear! When righteousness is in peril, I incarnate on earth to protect the downtrodden. I shall soon take birth as Devaki's eighth son and shall slay the evil Kansa.' Duly appeased, the Devas thanked me and went back to their abode, awaiting my arrival on earth.

The white BMW X3 sped along the old Mumbai-Pune highway. In the driver's seat was a satisfied young man, content at having completed his task as per plan. On the seat next to him was a zipped-up belt bag that contained the tools of his trade. His eyes remained glued to the road before him but they seemed almost lifeless and robot-like. He was just a little over five feet and seven inches tall, but his upper torso was like that of a bodybuilder, the evidence of many workouts on a multi gym. His hair was jet-black and cropped to a military crew-cut.

Taarak Vakil's flight from Jaipur to Mumbai had been delayed and by the time that he had picked up his car from the extended-stay parking lot at the airport, it was past midnight. There was no traffic at

15
ASHWIN SANGHI

this hour. He pressed the power button of his car's audio system to activate the music and the vehicle's air-conditioned interiors were soon drowned in a Sanskrit chant. It was the same verse that he had painted on Anil Varshney's wall. '*Mleccha-nivahanidhane kalayasi karavalam; dhumaketum iva kim api karalam; kesava dhrita-kalki-sarira jaya jagadisa hare!*'

Midway between Mumbai and Pune, he turned off into a private road. The sign outside simply bore the name of the business—Sambhala Stud Farm. His father, Dr V. Y. Sharma, had started the business of breeding horses with five mares and a stallion after completing veterinary training in the Sixties. It had been an uphill struggle that had eventually paid off. Sambhala now bred the finest derby winners in the country and was among the top two hundred listed companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange.

Taarak drove down the winding road and passed the equine viewing gallery, the automated horse-walkers, exercising turf tracks, veterinary clinic, and stables. Sambhala had grown from a couple of acres to India's largest integrated horse-breeding infrastructure, spread out over an area of just under a hundred acres. The BMW X3 sped past the gentle incline of the road until it reached the parking space

designated for it just outside the sprawling country home.

He turned off the engine, took the belt bag off the seat, got out of the vehicle and ran directly to a side-entrance that led to his suite of rooms. It allowed him to come and go as he pleased without having to use the main entrance used by his parents. His mother had not been too happy with this arrangement but

16

THE KRISHNA KEY

his father had stood up for his son's right to privacy. 'Let the lad be, Sumati. If you love your children, you must let them sprout wings and fly,' Dr Sharma had said to his wife.

'Have you seen the strange tattoos on his chest?' the worried mother had asked. 'He's spinning out of control. He no longer uses the name that we gave him at birth—Sampat Sharma—and instead goes by the ridiculous name of Taarak Vakil. I never know when he comes or goes. Sometimes I don't see him for weeks at a stretch, and you want me to give him wings?' 'Relax. He's still at the very top of his law class, isn't he? Our son is a gifted and exceptionally intelligent young man. We should be cautious of cramping his style,' Dr Sharma had advised his wife.

Taarak walked into his room, entered his bathroom and locked the door. He peeled off all his clothes, including his underwear, and placed them in a front-loading washer-dryer built in to one of the tiled walls. His upper torso was a veritable maze of tattoos—his muscular chest having turned blue from the intricate symbols that could not be individually discerned. However, at the centre of the various other images, was a large blazing sun.

He stepped into the shower cubicle where he allowed pressurised jets of steaming hot water, helped by generous quantities of antiseptic soap, to remove any traces of his nocturnal activities.

Emerging from the shower with a towel around his waist, Taarak headed directly to a walk-in closet within which was an electronic safe. Punching in a sequence of ten digits, he opened the vault, and

17

ASHWIN SANGHI

noticed the brown leather tray inside that contained several identical gleaming Swann-Morton surgical scalpels—each bearing the initials 'R.M.' He had used one of these the previous day to surgically bleed Varshney. *No need to worry. There's enough stock*

for the future.

From his belt bag, he carefully took out the plastic specimen bag that contained the seal that he had stolen from Varshney's residence. He placed the belt and the plastic specimen bag separately inside the safe and then locked it. He would examine the seal later. Still wrapped in his towel, he made his way to the living area of his suite. In one corner was located a contemporary brushed-steel oversized birdcage that had only one occupant—his pet parrot, Shuka. 'Morning Shuka,' he said solemnly to the parrot. 'Good morning, Master,' came the parrot's squawky trained reply. Pleased, his master changed the water and the birdseed inside the cage.

Putting on a pair of jeans and a white cotton tee shirt, he locked the door to his suite and walked over to the stables. The gate marked 'Deedee' was the one that he was headed for. He loved horses, having grown up on a stud farm. His father had presented him with Deedee when he was just fifteen. He would spend hours exercising, grooming, and feeding the horse. The stud farm's eight-times champion had sired Deedee. The champion had produced over two hundred winners and over a thousand wins, earning stakes in excess of several millions at the derbies. 'How are we today, Deedee?' he asked the horse, patting him affectionately. Ensuring that the stirrups

18

THE KRISHNA KEY

had been run up the leathers before starting, he placed his saddle so that the pommel was over the horse's withers. Walking around to the other side, he attached the girth and, reaching under Deedee's belly, he tightened it just enough to be snug. Having bridled the horse, he swiftly mounted him, caressed his mane lovingly and said 'Let's go, Deedee!'

As they trotted out into the meadows, Taarak took out his iPhone from the back pocket of his jeans and pressed a speed-dial key. The husky female voice that answered simply asked 'Yes?'

'Namaskar, Mataji,' said Taarak respectfully.

'Namaskar. Has the first one fallen?' asked the mysterious voice.

'Yes. He's dead,' replied Taarak.

'Good. Do you have them?' asked the husky voice.

'Only one. He should have had four—from Dwarka, Kalibangan, Kurukshetra and Mathura. Unfortunately, I only found one seal inside his house,' gulped Taarak. There was a pause at the other end.

Taarak was nervous.

'Don't worry. Those shall also be ours. Did you find the base plate?' asked the voice.

'No, it wasn't there, Mataji,' replied Taarak nervously.

'All in good time,' said the voice. 'Let us pray. Repeat after me, *Om Shri Prithvi Rakshasaaya Namah...*'

'*Om Shri Prithvi Rakshasaaya Namah,*' repeated Taarak.

'*Om Shri Maangalya Daayakaaya Namah,*' recited Mataji.

19



ASHWIN SANGHI

'*Om Shri Maangalya Daayakaaya Namah,*' echoed Taarak.

'*Om Shri Mooladhar Chakra Poojakaaya Namah,*' chanted Mataji.

'*Om Shri Mooladhar Chakra Poojakaaya Namah,*' parroted Taarak.

The phone conversation continued until all one hundred and eight names of the Almighty had been duly recited.

5

My parents, Vasudeva and Devaki, were dumped in a squalid dungeon with damp walls. Even though the prison was duly fortified, they were bound with chains to the walls under Kansa's orders. Some months later, my mother gave birth to her first son. Kansa knew that he had nothing to fear from the first seven children but the mischief-making Sage Narada paid him a visit and confused him. 'Kansa, which is the eighth child?' he asked meaningfully. 'Doesn't it depend upon the direction in which one counts? If one counts backwards, the eighth could very well be the first... or the first could be the eighth!' Kansa rushed to the prison cell, yanked the new born out of my mother's arms and smashed the innocent baby

20

THE KRISHNA KEY

against the prison walls. Blood and gore spattered my parents as they looked on in shock and despair.

Blood and gore spattered the walls and floor. Inspector Radhika Singh looked at the corpse without any hint of emotion though. She had seen too many dead

bodies over the years in her job. Her eyes mechanically scanned the lifeless form lying in a puddle of blood. She noticed the little wheel-like symbol on the victim's head as well as the Sanskrit shloka written on the wall above him. She stared at the Swann-Morton scalpel custom-engraved with the initials 'R.M.' There was very little that escaped Singh's attention.

Radhika Singh had begun her career as a teacher of history, geography and civics at the Mayo College. Born in small-town Ajmer, she had been heart-broken when her husband, a commandant in the Border Security Force, had been shot dead by two Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists. Not only had Radhika courageously attempted to defend her husband, she had also succeeded in stabbing one of the assailants, thus leading to his capture. Widowed at the age of just thirty, Singh had been seething with anger at the blows life had dealt her. Her anger had coincided beautifully with an experiment to open the country's first All Women Police Station—or AWPS. Awarded the Kirti Chakra for her bravery by the President of India, Singh chucked her lecturer's job at Mayo and joined the Indian Police Service, one of the first few women to do so. Soon, Singh had found herself absorbed into a fifteen-member team that was focused on preventing and solving crimes against women. A year later, Singh, along with around fifty women from various divisions of the IPS, signed up to

21

ASHWIN SANGHI

undergo commando training. Thirty of them were shortlisted and went through a harrowing twelve-week training course. Besides basic physical training, firefighting and martial arts, the women commando trainees had also been taught off-road driving, horse-back riding, sand running, swimming, parasailing, unarmed combat, wall-scaling, rowing, and rock-climbing. They had also been given training in handling AK-47s and light machine guns. Other elements of the training programme had included bomb detection and disposal, and hijack and hostage handling. Back on the job three months later, Singh had won the gold medal in the state police shooting championship, beating policemen and male commandos in the process.

Now a veteran in the police force, Singh was usually referred to as 'Sniffer Singh' among her colleagues for her beagle-like ability to follow a scent to its source. Not only was she extremely bright, she also had the

doggedness of a mule and the strength of an ox. She could persevere on a search for days on end while young men who were half her age would give up out of sheer exhaustion.

Forty-three years old, Radhika Singh had the body of a Rajput warrior queen but the analytical mind of a Tamil engineer. Her staple diet consisted of almonds, whole milk and cigarettes. At the oddest of times she would reach into her pockets and pull out a handful of almonds to chew slowly and thoughtfully. The smoking was a habit from her combat training days but she genuinely seemed to believe that the almonds and milk were adequate detox agents for the nicotine. Judging by her appearance, the almonds and

22 THE KRISHNA KEY

milk seemed to be doing their purported job. Radhika had a perfectly trim figure that belied her age. Her complexion was as smooth as the ivory on the handle of her personal Smith & Wesson.

Singh's early marriage had been an arranged one but she had eventually fallen in love with her husband, unlike in most arranged marriages where love was optional. Her world had shattered into millions of tiny shards on the day that he died. From that day on, she had chosen to take on a new spouse—her work. It was almost as though the pursuit of criminals was her way of paying tribute to her husband's departed soul. Her aloof behaviour attracted disparaging remarks from male colleagues but Singh was beyond caring. Her only care seemed to be to aggressively pursue criminals and to bring them to justice. In moments of melancholy or despair, she would count prayer beads and meditate to the chant of *Hari*. In a police force known only for its apathy, incompetence and corruption, cases assigned to Radhika Singh rarely remained unsolved for long.

'I want photos of the victim's head, and get the photo of that symbol on his forehead enlarged,' she barked to Rathore, her sub-inspector. 'Take blood samples from the victim as well as from the puddle of blood around him. Also check to see if the shloka on the wall is written with the same blood.'

Rathore meticulously made note of her instructions and relayed her orders to subordinates. 'Do we know who the victim is?' asked Singh.

'Ma'am, the victim seems to be one Mr Anil Varshney. His body was identified by the servant who

23

ASHWIN SANGHI

reported to work at his usual time at eight in the morning,’ replied Rathore to his boss.

‘Has the medical examiner seen the body yet? Do we have a time of death?’ asked Singh.

‘Not yet, ma’am. Varshney was a symbolist who was working on a project at the archaeological dig at Kalibangan. According to the servant, Varshney had a visitor over for dinner. The servant was told that he could leave after washing up the dishes.’

‘At what time did the servant leave?’

‘Around nine at night.’

‘And had the visitor left by then?’

‘The visitor was supposed to drive to Delhi via Jaipur at night but he was still with Varshney when the servant left.’

‘Check the servant’s background and verify his movements,’ said Singh absentmindedly, counting the prayer beads in her pocket while her subconscious recited the name of Hari. ‘Get the entire house fingerprinted, especially that scalpel in the victim’s foot. Ah, and yes, find out for me what that shloka on the wall means. In the meantime, find out who this visitor was. It seems that he was the last person to see Varshney alive. He could well be a psychopath for all we know and I have no intention of letting him get away so easily.’

Document Outline

[Prelims](#)

[Inner pages](#)