

TKRAGHU

Dickey's school show

tkraghu

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Chapter1

Old Shanta was relaxing on her ancient easy chair, catching the evening sun .She was on the terrace of her single storey house. A tall fruit bearing mango tree growing in the compound formed a nice green leafy back drop. A gentle breeze was blowing across her face. The slanting rays of the setting sun caught the diamonds in her ears, made them shine brilliantly. Her head was thrown back, with her long grey hair falling behind in a graceful drop. She was proud of her long hair. Years of use of ammonia based dyes had bleached the hair and the silver in them glowed in the sun. Her broad fair forehead was bare, slightly lined on account of age..Lines around her eyes indicated how gracefully she had aged. A long cushioned couch was set in front of her chair and she stretched her legs to touch the edge of the couch with her toes. The stretch of muscles seemed to calm her disturbed nerves. Most evenings she had somebody to keep company sitting on the comfortable couch , sipping coffee and munching hot pakoras. Today she was all alone. There was no friend at her side, there was no tea and of course no pakoras. A wry smile danced in her face and vanished.

She was alone in the house. Her son sharad and daughter in law with two grand children had gone out to see a film. They will have their dinner and return home late. They had left no food for her. The fruit bowl on the dining table had two bananas and an orange. There was some cold milk in the fridge. She had to manage on her own for any food. Her family was angry with her and they showed their displeasure this way. There was still some time for her to worry about her supper.

She looked around her. She could see the neat line up of flower pots. The jasmine creeper had worked her way right up to the tallest part of her house. A green bushy thulasi was glistening in the sun. It was her favourite plant. She never failed to water that plant every morning after chanting Sri Krishna's slokas.

She remembered the hot words uttered by her son in the course of heated arguments between mother and son. It was not the first time. It was becoming more frequent in recent days. It was always about money. According to her son, he was always short of it while she had pots and pots of it stashed away some where and she was so miserly that she would not help her only son fund his daughters education through medical school and high school. He was blind to

the fact that his wife had expensive tastes and blew a great deal of their savings gambling away at the card table at the club.

Yes, it is true that Shanta had seen very affluent days. After all that is said and done, her husband was a supreme court Judge and she herself held a position of professor of Religious Philosophy at the university. They had lived well, travelled far and wide, built this house and seen a son and daughter graduate and settle down well in life. The husband wife Duo had a spiritual streak in them and they supported so many worthy causes that they could save so little of what they earned.. It never mattered to them that they were throwing away money .They thought they had sufficient money to tide over the retirement phase. The son never believed a word of such explanations.

But today's argument was not about money.. In fact, for any one else, it was over a trivial matter. To any one but Shanta.. She should not have reacted the way she did. It was her fault this time. Yet she could not forgive her son and family for what they did. How could they take out an item from her cupboard and hand it over with out her consent , to be put out for auction.. An item which she had treasured and preserved over thirty long years. It did not appear to be improper at all for her son and his wife.. She could not take it at all and she threw words left and right. Sharad and family felt the same and they left in a huff to clear the air and she was left behind alone, crying.

She decided that she would visit her grand daughter's school and meet with the Principal and take back the item deposited by her grand Daughter Aarti for display in the Art and Craft exhibition and subsequent auction to raise money for the school. The item was an exquisite carpet of wool and silk garnished with gold threads and embedded with pearls and semi precious stones. It was completely done by hand by Shanta over twelve months, spending a fortune. In fact she made two like that .One was gifted away to the shrine at Ajmer. She had hoped to present the second one to the most extra ordinary friend, who had saved her husband. She was not sure that the friend would appreciate the gift because he was too rough to like any thing so delicate and beautiful like her carpet.. But she kept the carpet and maintained the friendship.

Only recently ,her grand daughter Aarti had taken a sudden interest in knitting and shanta had helped her to learn the basics of knitting and how to make intricate designs using wool and silk threads. During one training session, shanta had taken out the carpet made by her to show Aarti a sample of her

own work. The girl was so excited that she wanted the whole world to know what her dear Granny had created. Without telling her, Aarti removed the carpet and submitted it to the school, for display in an Art and Craft exhibition to be held at the time of school annual day celebrations. Aarti did not inform her grand mother about it. It did not strike her at all that what she was doing was not proper. When Shanta came to know about it she blew her top. Sharad took his daughter to task for her action and tried to assure his mother that item would not be auctioned and would be brought back immediately after the exhibition. Shanta would not hear a word of this explanation and she insisted that they should get back her carpet right away. Sharad lost his patience and told her simply to go to hell. He decided to go out for the evening with his family leaving his mother alone to fend for herself. Shanta was now ruling over the matter and planning her moves to retrieve her treasure.

Shanta had her own standing in the society and had friends who would help her without reservation. It was a school originally promoted by her husband and presently run by ex service men organisation promoted by her friends. So it should not be such a difficult job to get her item back. She decided that she would show her son how she could take care of her own assets.

With such thoughts crowding her mind, she called up her friend Kaddu (short for Kadambari), a leading supreme court lawyer and, a long time friend. When the soft voice of Kaddu came on the line, she felt encouraged to open her heart out. She poured everything over. Kaddu listened to all that patiently. Shanta finally said, 'that is it Kaddu. I have to visit the school tomorrow, first thing. Will you please tell Dickey to pick me up from my house and drive me over to school. After all, it is his school, you know'

Kaddu laughed out aloud and shouted at Dickey who was nearby, conveying what Shanta wanted. She said to Shanta, 'it is okay dear. You heard me shout at Dickey. He will be there to run you over to his school. Only request is go easy on him. He is not at all like your Sharad. He does not like being shouted at especially by old ladies like you and me.'

They all laughed together. Shanta put the phone back in its place.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax. Her mind was doing a flash back of time she spent knitting the carpet. The smiling face of her long dead husband danced in front of her eyes. She murmured softly 'do not worry Vikram. I will get our

treasure back. Dickey is there to help” .Five kilo meters away , at Friend’s nest
Dickey was asking kaddu ’what has she done now?

Chapter2

By the time he was thirty, Vikram had established himself as a powerful lawyer and an accomplished speaker. He took on speaking assignments on legal topics to law schools. His marriage with Shanta was already four years old and every thing looked rosy. Both Shanta and Vikram came from families where education was given top priority and development of social interest was a natural progression. They made an ideal pair, well on the way up in the social ladder. One, as a fighting Lawyer and other as a spirited academician with a flair for religious philosophy. It threw them in the company of educated lot embracing all religious beliefs with out any of the despicable dogma. So when the invitation came from Ajmer to address the first convocation meeting of the newly formed corporate Law school, they were both excited. Vikram's parents had been worried over the fact that even after four years of marriage Shanta had shown no sign of interest in having a baby. So when Dr Jehangir mentioned that a visit to Ajmer dharga would do the trick, shanta pressed Vikram to take up the assignment. It was slated in the beginning of winter season and climate in Ajmer would be just fine. Shanta had begun work on a new carpet. She visited hyderabad for pearls and kancheepuram for gold threads and Bangalore, Bellary for semi precious stones and colourful beads. She had spent some time with a weaver's family to get to know about weaving frame and tools required to hand knit a carpet with in the frame. She had settled on a knitting routine and hoped she would complete the carpet in time for the Ajmer visit. As per suggestion of Dr Jehangir, she had decided to present the woollen chaader(carpet) to the shrine. Shanta and Vikram decided they would take in pushkar, Jaipur and Ajmer in one trot.

The speech at the convocation was a huge success as the new law graduates enjoyed a lively interaction with a young firebrand of their own kind and his young wife. So when the couple entered the shrine at Ajmer, there were many young friends to felicitate their visit and a meeting was arranged with the chairman of Dharga committee, a bearded Mulla who showed proper appreciation of the gift brought by a couple embracing different faith. So it was a grand occasion when the thin chaader was unpacked in front of the tomb. The blue of the wool and yellow of gold and red stripes of silk in an intricate floral design caught every one's breath. The chairman was so astounded by the quality of work that in his brief acceptance speech he mentioned, "this dharga has received gifts over centuries from many a royal houses and Princely patrons but

nothing matched the extraordinary beauty of humble offering from the visitors from south.”.As the excited couple stepped outside the portals of the sacred tomb, shanta already felt the small swell in her abdomen. She told Vikarm about it and Vikram laughed. He did not believe in miracles. For him God was every where and he saw more of God in body of good people, their deeds and words. He set store more by the blessings of living good souls than long dead ones inspite of their religion . Sharad was born exactly ten months later and was named after the season in which they had visited the dharga.

As shanta waited in the hall , she wiped a tear from her eyes as memories flooded her mind. The twin of that chaader was lying in the school cupboard some where.It had to be retrieved and restored to the place where it belonged.

The Doorbell rang and she walked towards the door to open it. She saw the cheerful face of Dickey swirling his golf cap in his hands and sporting a big toothy smile. He said, ‘hello shanta, you took your own time reaching the door. I thought the bloody bell was not ringing. My mind was already thinking of hundred different ways to smash down the un willing door. You saved your precious door in the nick of time”

Yes, sir, at times , I also play the saviour,’ she gave him a tight hug, lingering there for a moment, savouring the contact with a strong body of a trusted friend .”welcome, home, Dickey” she told him with a warm smile ,slowly unwinding herself from his grip. She had kept a cup of tea ready for him and she offered the same to him. With a word of thanks, Dickey took the proffered cup and asked if her Children were around. She informed him that she was alone and in a hurry. She should be back home before the daughter in law returned from her clinic.

They locked up the house and got into the car with Dickey taking the wheel.. Before turning on the ignition, he asked ‘Shanta ,here we are. My car is all ready to go. where would you like to go first?”

Oh, let us run first to the school and meet with the Principal.

Shanta, Can’t you just call her over to your place and talk. She will be very happy to visit you, you know that.

No. This is a serious matter and I would like to deal with out Sharad and his wife getting to know about what I talk with the Principal

Why? what is the problem?

It is not yet a problem. But if I do not act immediately it can turn out to be big problem.

For the School?

No, not for the school. For me , personally

How? I am not sure that I understand.

Do not worry, Dickey. Nobody has ever accused you of being very smart. Just drive me to school and watch me talk to the Principal, you will understand every thing.

‘Shanta, I would like you to explain to me what your problem with Principal of the school is. It is our school and presently I am the director of the school board and I am entitled to know, before you confront the principal, using me as your shield or battering ram which ever suits you.’

Well—

I am waiting,

Dickey. Here is the problem. You know Aarti, Sharad’s younger daughter. She has handed over my chaader to the School Principal for display in the school sponsored handicraft exhibition and auction. She has done it with out my knowledge and permission.

UH, UH

Which Chaader?

You know the one.

Dickey frowned.

Did you talk to Sharad.

Yes I did.

What did he say?

He said I am making unnecessary fuss over an ancient chaader that is worth zero value presently. The child wanted to display some thing and took the

chaader. He said he would get it back after the exhibition. He does not see anything wrong in the child removing an item belonging to me from my room without my permission.. I know it for a fact that once it goes on display, it won't come back to me. So I asked him to get it back. He refused point blank and insulted me by saying I am behaving like a school girl myself.

Dickey did not want to be a party to a family tiff. He said in a worried manner, "so, you want to take back that item."

Yes, very much.

"Suppose the Principal says that goods once submitted for exhibition can not be taken back till exhibition is over. What will you do?"

That is where you come in

"What do you mean?"

You will tell the Principal to return the item to me without making any issue about it.

"Seems simple. Is it not?."

Dead simple.

"Shanta, you know when I get involved, things do not stay simple. They grow into a monster and get me into more trouble. Is there any thing called retirement in your dictionary .It pains you and kaddu to see me live happily."

Stop grumbling and start driving. You are our hero and act like one.

Yes, madam

The car raced towards the school.

Chapter3

The National model school was 4 kilometers away from Shanta's house. Built on a two acre plot of what was once a thriving farm land. The place boasted of an inspiring landscape with back ground of boulder strewn high lands.. The place was well removed from the bustle of city by a long straight road lined with tall leafy trees that formed a nice canopy. The school consisted of four large buildings forming a square all round a sprawling play ground. The roads on all sides of square were meticulously clean. All buildings were painted white, all doors were painted brown and all buildings had terracotta Mangalore tiles of golden brown. The buildings were functionally sound and aesthetically eye catching. The high ceilings and polished brass fittings all over, gave an impression of simple elegance for a school.

The entire school was brain child of Justice Vikram and funded by his friends. After passing a ruling in a sensational scandal in school administration in control of powerful vested interests supported by slimy politicians, the judge vowed to show the world how a school should be run. The Judge and his wife invested all their life savings in the project. Dickey and his friends stepped in to offer protection to the judge when his pet project was threatened by the politicians. Judge died leaving the school in the control of Dickey and His cousin Col Prabhu. Today it was recognised as a model school, strong on discipline, sports and all round development. Its Scholastic achievements were not in any way less praiseworthy. But the school believed scholastic development was by product of healthy mind free from pressures and stresses of excessive competition. The judge had implicit faith in Dickey's ability to implement his ideas. The brief speech he had given at the time of fare well meeting for first batch of class ten students was engraved in the main hall of school. All he said was 'reach out with full conviction and commitment in every one of your endeavours and the glory will find its way towards you'. Conviction and commitments were the principle motto of this school.

The school was now run by ex service men and their family. Dickey was convinced that defence forces of India represented all that was best in the country and even after retirement, the servicemen could take up a role in the shaping up of the youth of the country. He and his friends from the "friend's nest" ensured that the school had every resource required for its upkeep and development.

Dickey drove his car straight to security bunker and signalled to the guard operating the bar that formed a barrier for vehicles entering the school premises. The bar lifted and he drove through towards the main admin building. Security guards were in place at strategic places. The entire campus looked as though transplanted from some cantonment.. The security Chief a retired Sargeant from Dickey's unit stepped out to greet the visitors. By the time Shanta and Dickey got out of the car in the parking place, the security chief was at their side. A smart salute towards Dickey and a neat Bow to the old lady, completed the welcome ceremony.. An engraved name plate pinned on the bright blue shirt showed his name as Ashok Reddy.

Dickey asked "All well ,Ashok.? School looks rather deserted.'

Yes sir. It is vacation time, you know. Maintenance work is going on. We should be ready for the reopening by next week.

"Is the Principal Madame in?"

No, not yet. It is time for her arrival. Shall I open the Chairman's chamber for you to wait? I will inform her of your visit.

Dickey and Shanta walked behind Ashok Reddy, who led them towards the Chairman's chamber. They climbed a flight of stairs and walked into a familiar room as Ashok opened the door wide for their entry... Ashok took leave and shanta leaned back on her sofa enjoying the comfortable feeling. The feminine touch of Kaddu was clearly visible in the colour scheme and type of furniture, curtains and book shelf. . Shanta remarked as such and Dickey smiled. He opened the refrigerator and took out two bottles of cool drink and offered one to shanta and occupied chair behind the working desk.

'You are serious about taking back your item?'" Dickey enquired.

Shanta took a sip and placed the bottle back on the table and replied, 'yes. It has been missing from my cup board for the last two weeks. I think it was removed just before school closed for vacation... I do not want that piece to be displayed in any exhibition nor auctioned. It is too valuable an item and I expect to keep it with me till my call time.'

Principal Nalini tapped at the door. Dickey looked up and smiled at her. He invited her to come in and meet with Shanta. She sat alongside Shanta and made polite enquiries about her health. Nalini was a natural public relation

expert. She knew how to deal with friends of directors, family members of founders of school.

After polite exchange of courtesies, Dickey asked Nalini if she was aware of the fact that Shanta's grand Daughter Aarti was a student of her school.

Nalini answered promptly, 'Yes, Of course, I know Aarti in class 11. She is one of our star students. She gets along very well with other students and the teaching faculty.'

Shanta said, 'I have come here to talk about her. I understand that you are planning to organise an Exhibition of art and handicraft items, alongside the annual day celebrations. It seems you have invited students to present articles made by them for display and auction.'

Nalini said, 'Yes, that is right. I thought it is a good way to make the visitors aware of the skills acquired by our students in the field of art and handicraft. Auction was an afterthought, an idea mooted by one teacher. The idea was to allow the students earn some money for their efforts.'

Shanta said, "That is a very nice idea. Do you know that Aarti also has submitted an article for display?"

It was more of a statement than a question.

Nalini replied promptly, 'Has she? I would not know about it. You know we have a committee for organising this exhibition. Certain teachers are assigned to the committee. They deal with submissions'

The answer came so smoothly that Shanta was taken aback. Dickey stirred in his seat, becoming suddenly alert.

Shanta kept pressing, "I remember Aarti telling me clearly that she handed over her item to you personally. You were very impressed with what you saw. You said some very nice things about it"

Is that so? Well, I do not remember anything like that. I do not receive any thing direct. I always ask students to deposit the exhibits with specified teachers concerned.'

Shanta kept herself on the subject, "Well, she clearly told me that you took it in your hand. The point I am trying to make is that, that particular Item was made

by me and it was taken out of my room and handed over to you without my permission or consent. I am upset about it and would like to collect it back. That is the reason for my present visit. Please arrange for it to be returned to me now.”

Nalini stared at her. She said, 'It is absolutely improper on the part of Aarti to have brought that item here without your consent. I will definitely speak to her about it. About your wanting to take the item back, you will have to talk to concerned staff dealing with exhibition. Now that you are here, you can talk to the person concerned. I will advise them that you are here and want to talk to them'

Dickey got a distinct feeling that Nalini was talking very glibly without any flutter. He was sure that she was covering up something. He made up his mind to look into the matter.

Dickey said, 'you don't expect an old Lady to go about enquiring with your staff. You please talk to your staff and arrange to collect the item submitted by Aarti and forward it to me.'

He then turned towards shanta and said in soft way, 'Now, Shanta, do not get upset. I will deal with the matter.'

He got up from his seat to indicate to Nalini that the purpose of calling her over to his room was over. He said, 'That is all, Nalini. You may leave now. But please make enquiry and arrange to get Shanta's item back. I will now drive her back to her place'

Nalini stood up, shook hands with Shanta and assured her that she would get her article back and not to worry too much. She bowed her head toward Dickey and walked out. Dickey waited for the door to close behind Nalini and then called his security chief on intercom and requested him to come up and see him immediately. While they waited for Security chief Ashok Reddy to arrive, shanta said in a low voice, 'did you notice how coolly she lied. Aarti clearly described how excited Nalini was, when that chaader was in her hand. She made a remark that it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. NOW SHE SAYS, SHE DOES NOT KNOW ANY THING ABOUT IT...I am shocked, Dickey.'

Dickey said, 'I got the same impression. Do not fret, Shanta. I will get to the bottom of this affair. You must relax now.'"

Ashok Reddy knocked and entered. Dickey explained the matter to Ashok and then said, "Ashok, do me a favour. Go and check with the head of the exhibition committee if there is one such thing. Shanta says that Aarti had handed over the item to Nalini in person. She wants to take back her item. Please arrange to collect it and return it to her."

'Just now?' asked Ashok

Yes please, if possible. Shanta is getting pretty worked up about it and it affects her health. At her age it is not nice. Ashok smiled at Shanta and said he will go immediately

Dickey said, 'Do that Ashok .Be discrete about your enquiries. Do not tip your hand to Nalini. We have to know what game she is playing. She is very new to our school. If she is not our kind of person, we have to take corrective action. It may be that we are going overboard with our suspicions. Let us be smart and find out what is going on.

One more thing, Ashok. Please tell one of your drivers to drive my car and drop Shanta at her place.

Ashok left the room. Shanta waited till the driver was ready and then left the place. Dickey walked with her up to the car, helped her to get in .He returned to his room, with a scowl in his face and plunged into work

Dickey opened a cupboard and took out a folder containing the file pertaining to appointment of Principal Nalini. He realised that he did not know too much about her back ground .He studied the certificates and reference letters and remarks made by the interviewing committee. A small worm of suspicion became active in his mind. He decided to wait for Ashok to make his report before taking any action.

Chapter4

Ashok Reddy casually walked up to the Administration building and climbed up the staircase to the first floor where the teacher's common room and convenience facilities were located. He pushed the door and walked into the sprawling and well-furnished Room used by the teachers... Stella the class xi teacher was pouring over a newspaper spread over a glass topped table, with a pair of scissors in one hand ready to snip off a bit of the paper containing some interesting news item... She looked up to see Ashok Reddy walk towards her. She dropped the scissors and raised a hand in greeting and asked, "Hello Ashok, How are you and what brings you to this drab staff room.

Ashok responded cheerfully, "HI Stella, I am just looking around. If you call this drab, I do not know what you will say about my cubicle. I wanted to check with you on one matter. Stella, do you know Aarti, the granddaughter of Judge Vikarm. I think she is in your class."

Yes, Ashok. I know her pretty well. A smart kid. What happened to her?' she asked with genuine concern in her tone.

"Nothing.' Ashok did not want to rush.

"Then, why this visit?" Stella probed.

'Did she submit any article for the exhibition?'

Stella was silent

"Why are you asking about it, now?"

'So she submitted an item?' The question hung in the air for some time.

Stella stared at him.

' Well, I want it back.'

You want it back?

Yes .I want to take it back to the house. Aarti's grandmother was here this morning asking for it. The chief has asked me to collect it from you and return the same to the family. It seems the kid had brought it here without informing any one.'

"It is not here, Ashok."

‘Why? What happened to it?’

Nalini gave it away.

She did? To who?

Satish Agarwal.

Ashok whistled.

‘Are you sure?’

Yes. Nalini was fascinated by that stuff. She talked about it with Satish Agarwal, who has been visiting her frequently in recent days. Once when he was here, she asked for that item to be brought to her chambers to be shown to Satish. It never came back to the locker’

Are you sure?

Yes. I asked Nalini about it as there was an entry in the register.

“She asked me to write in the register that the item was returned as per request.”

And you did.

‘No I did not .The register still says item was moved to principal’s room.’

But you are not sure that she had given it away to some one?

‘I am sure. I asked about it again. She told me that Satish Agarwal took a fancy for it and bought it away outright.’

Are you sure, Stella? This is important.

‘Yes, I am sure. Why is there any problem?’

Not yet. Stella, I suggest you forget the whole thing. Forget that I asked about it. And do not mention my interest in the item to Nalini. Is it clear?’

Stella nodded her head, with a confused look in her large face. Ashok came close to Stella and patted her hand in a friendly gesture and walked out.

Ashok made a formal report to Dickey about his conversation with Stella. Dickey listened to it without interrupting and then asked, “Who is this Agarwal? Ashok, you know anything about him?”

Ashok replied, ‘No, not much. But in recent days, he has been visiting our school rather frequently. I will check this out.’

Dickey showed some concern, ‘Yes, you do that Ashok. Agarwal is a common name. But I remember that I had put away Prakash Agarwal, who was involved in a scandal. Judge Vikram had passed a rather harsh sentence and Prakash sent his goons to threaten the judge to change the verdict. I had to deal rather strongly and the man ended up in the jail on a 15 year sentence. I hope this Sathish is not related in some way. If he is related, then we have a bigger problem on our hand. Please investigate him and let me know. We will inform the police if necessary.’

Ashok walked out to his room... He took out the visitors register and ran through the entries and underlined the entries pertaining to Sathish Agarwal’s visit. He noted down in his cell phone, the car numbers and telephone numbers. A call to the RTO’s office and obtained the residential address.

He decided to call on Sathish Agarwal’s house just to case the joint. He remembered what Dickey had said about possibility of Sathish Agarwal being related to Prakash Agarwal. PUT AWAY BY HIM FOR GOOD. He remembered the story that was going around the units about how Dickey took on the Hyderabad based goons in a fierce encounter that left behind half a dozen goons maimed and almost killed.

Chapter 5

Dickey was visiting Bolaram unit of commando training centre of southern command of Indian Army to review the training programme. He had exactly a month to retire and the Army headquarters was kind enough to allow Dickey visit every one of the units he was associated with over 35 years of Army life. The last station was Hyderabad because he had decided to settle down after retirement at Hyderabad along with his four other childhood friends. They had built a nice bungalow near the cantonment in a place called Marredpalli. Their new house was called Friend's nest. The other four had already moved into the house. Dickey was the youngest of the lot and he too was all set to join them after completing his last assignment with the commando unit.

The message came just as he was concluding his post training review. It was from Kaddu and she appeared desperate. The message simply said, "Dickey, am in trouble, please contact Col Prabhu immediately. Code red to operate"

Dickey smiled. It was like old times, exchanging cryptic messages. He called up Col Prabhu and as the commanding tone of Col came on line, Dickey said, "Dickey here. Just got Kaddu's message. What is the problem? Do you want me to come home?"

"Hello son, so nice of you to call so soon. Yes, there is some trouble. They have kidnapped Judge Vikram. His wife Shanta and her children are here. Kaddu was with the judge. We know where she is. There is a case going on against Prakash Agarwal, the chit fund baron. He has defaulted on interest payment to a large section of population, who are buying for his blood and as you know Kaddu has taken up their case and got Prakash all tied up nicely legally. Vikram is sitting on the case and Prakash has asked for change of judge citing the fact that Kaddu and Vikram are friends. Court refused to entertain his request and Vikram is all set to pass the judgement. Prakash is applying pressure to force an out of court settlement. Kaddu said, no. Prakash has started playing rough and the last session in the courtroom was interrupted by hired goondas who thrashed the court staff, broke up all furniture and captured the judge and escaped. Mouli went to help Kaddu and got mercilessly thrashed but he stood by Kaddu. They are all being held together with the judge. Home Ministry is talking to Prakash and he is having an upper hand because some big political head is also involved. It is a mess and police are waiting for instructions. George is here and Vittal is

taking the flight from states to be with us. I want to make our move to save the judge and our sis and her friend Mouli. Kaddu felt you should know about this and I said no, considering the fact that you are busy .Yet, she has sent you the message.'

Dickey heard all this. He knew that the col would be mad at Kaddu for contacting him over ruling col's advice.

Dickey said, "I am free for next two days. I have a bunch of fifteen hard core commandos all ready to showcase their recently acquired skills for public cause. I will send them to the city for an n evening .They can be handy."

Okay. That is good news. Come home by five and bring your friends. I will call George over.

"Where are the Dogs?"

They are here.

"I think we will use them if George will spare them"

No sweat. He has been complaining that the dogs have become fat because they do not do any work.

Okay, Dada. I will see you by five.

Yes, son.

The relation between Col and Dickey is very close. They grew up in the same house. Col was always a Dada, an elder brother and for the col Dickey was always the chotu. Dickey's father was a driver in Col Prabhu's house. The driver died in a tragic accident leaving behind a two year old son and a young wife. The wife went back to Nepal leaving behind little Dickey to be taken care off by Shankar, a leading Doctor in Poona. Shankar brought up the little one as his own son .Prabhu was 7 years older than Dickey and maintained very affectionate interest in the little boy. When Prabhu graduated from NDA Dickey swore that he would follow his Dada very soon. Seven years later Dickey also passed out of NDA, and was attached to Prabhu's unit. The two brothers remained close to each other right through service and shared many adventures in far flung battle fields of SriLanka, Congo, Palestine, and Indochina, Malaysia. In the cantonments of Indian Army, the duo became extremely popular for their Bravery and leadership qualities under most trying situations.

Dickey passed off many promotions so that he could stay with his Dada. Stories about Dickey punching the army chief of Staff in the nose for insulting Col Prabhu, is still doing the rounds.

Dickey borrowed a jeep from the transport department and drove towards Maredpalli. The traffic was thin and he made good time. He had instructed his team to be in the vicinity of Secunderabad court. Soon he was in front of the massive gates of his new home and an elderly Nepali lady opened the doors. Her face lit up the moment she saw Dickey, she moved to the side to allow the car to drive in and park near the portico. She ran after the car and helped Dickey to remove his overnight suitcase; Dickey gave her a hug and pinched her cheek in a childish way. They walked together into the sprawling living room, from where a flight of stairs led to the first floor rooms. He told the lady "Mai, some hot tea and anything to go with it. I am hungry". Col Prabhu walked in slowly with a big smile of welcome. Dickey ran into his wide open arms like a young child. They stayed together like that for a few moments in silence. 'So you are here. Excellent. Go up and have a wash. Your tea and some hot pakoras will be ready in a moment'

Dickey ran up the steps whistling an old tune. He rolled on his bed, opened the cup boards and looked at the fresh looking set of dresses hanging in the wardrobe. He peeped into his bath room and toilet and was thrilled that everything was so well arranged, just like his old house in Poona. For some time his thoughts wandered about those early days with his foster father, mother and brothers, friends. He smiled and said a few words of thanks to the god and rushed through wash, change of clothes. He came down to the dining table dressed in his typical, informal dress of white round neck T-shirt and Khaki shorts

Dada was sitting at his place and Mai placed a tray of Pakoras and steaming pot of tea. Dickey pulled the tray towards him and poured out tea into two cups and pushed one towards Dada who looked up and smiled his thanks. Sipping his tea he started briefing Dickey about developments relating to Kaddu, judge Vikram and the case. 'PRESENTLY Kaddu and vikram are being held in a house close to the court. Police have got it surrounded but are waiting for instruction from home minister because involvement of party VIP in the scam. This is a politically a very sensitive situation and police have their hands tied. Mouli is stuck with Kaddu. There are ten goons with them all armed and looking dangerous.

Prakash is stationed in another place, a hotel room across the road. George is holed up in the same hotel in a room across the Prakash's room .He has got his gun all ready; His room door is wide open. He is waiting for the guy to step out .George has taken over the hotel temporarily, with the owner all tied up nicely and pushed under his cot..

We are waiting for you to show up and stir things a little.

You have any ideas

Dickey looked at Col and said, 'yes, I have.'

What is that?

Lob a grenade into Prakash's room and send the sweeper to clean up the room.

Col and Mai laughed out aloud.

Dickey asked Mai, 'Did I say anything stupid, Mai?'

Mai got up and cleared the tray and walked towards her kitchen. On the way she said," I am making biryani for the evening .you better finish your work and be on time for dinner. Dada likes his food hot. Biryani tastes like rubber when cold. That means you have less than two hours to clean up this mess and get kaddu, vikram and that kid Mouli here safe and sound. Poor Shanta and her children are worried sick. Shanta's father came and took them to his house. .And another thing, chotu, you take good care of yourself. Did you hear me?"

Mai, you know I am selectively deaf. But the word Biryani sounded loud and clear .Two hours is lot of time to squash a crap like Prakash.

You just stay here and watch.

Chapter 6

A jeep driven by four young men, in a boisterous mood swung into the courtyard of a big house. The jeep screeched to a halt and the young men jumped out.

One shouted, "Devan, are you sure, we are at the right place? I don't see any girls here and you promised me good time; remember .I will hold you to it."

"Yes. Yes. They are here alright. These girls are not the type to flaunt their wares out in open. Have some sense. They are all there, believe me."

They walked in. The house looked empty. Devan took out a grenade and lobbed it into an empty room and ducked for cover covering his ears. A loud explosion brought the walls down exposing six nervous goons. "Hey Devan, I see one girl here alright, but not my type though." By now the gang was very close to the waiting goons. Next few minutes were over fast. The young men jumped and kicked. They swung their hands around and punched and pulled. They were incredibly fast and brutal.

One sirdar shouted, "That Gurkha gave us just four minutes to finish the job and we are late by two minutes. That guy will fry us over low fire for next thirty days. Let us go before he shows up. Our work is over". Six stiff goons were lying on the floor spread eagled.

Dickey walked through still settling dust and kicked the door open. Kaddu screamed, "you took your time, you idiot. But I love you." She took a running jump and smothered Dickey. Then she turned to the judge Vikram and told him, "I told you vikram, I told you he will come, here he is."

She allowed Dickey to free himself and walk towards Vikram who stood looking dazed. He extended his hand towards the man in white T-shirt and kaki short. Hesitatingly he said, "Major, this girl here is driving me nuts with stories about all great things you have accomplished. I am somewhat disappointed ,I was looking for someone ten feet tall , broad like a truck, not to talk about Popeye forearm and ham fist'. He grabbed Dickey's hand and put his own arm around him in a tight embrace. He continued, "notwithstanding anything I said, let me say, I am very impressed."

Dickey shook his head and said softly. Judge, people always complain that I am selectively deaf .I did not hear one word. But that should not worry you. Mai is

waiting at home with a big heap of steaming biryani and she says eating cold biriyani is like eating rubber. So let us make our self scarce and run before the neighbours look in to see what all the noise was about. He saw Mouli looking unhappy. Dickey stood in front of him and said, 'I understand you took three of them out single handed that is something I could never do. I always needed an army to do my dirty work. You were great, Commissioner. Give me your hand, young man.' " Mouli stood stiff and erect. They shook hands like soldiers, 'Pleasure to meet you, Major. My day is made. You said three. The fourth one floored me.'

They all laughed. There was relief in that laughter.

'It happens all the time, young man. It happens all the time.' Said Dickey like a sage, 'the trick is to take a break after three, take a deep breath, and swing again .You will learn all the tricks if you stick to me'

That moment a new bond was cemented between the young IPS officer Mouli and a retiring army man Dickey.

They walked out of the house. An inspector heading a team of six policemen was running towards them. He recognised Mouli and stopped and saluted...Mouli glared at him. The Inspector said, 'Very sorry, sir, for not showing up earlier. There is total confusion at HQ. I could not wait any more, so gathered my men and rushed here. I see you are all free. Anything left inside for me to do?'

Mouli relented, yes, there are ten goons lying in there in different conditions of damage. Pick them up and roast them over low fire till I come. I have some unfinished work. I will be back at the HQ by late evening. Some body has promised hot Biriyani and if I miss that I will never forgive myself"

The inspector did not understand one word. He saluted and said,"yes, sir.You attend to your work .I will take care of stiffs in there.

And Sir, what was that explosion?"

Mouli pointed out to Dickey, "Don't be fooled by his dress. He sent Half the Indian army to make a hole in the wall to make a great entry. His men took the goons out and we are free"

The Inspector looked at Dickey and grinned. 'A little messy but effective, I would say .Thank you sir.' He turned and walked away.

“That man has got guts’, said Dickey.

‘Yes, sir. That was Inspector Kamath. The toughest cop on the beat. He will be cursing your commando trainees for not leaving behind any decent work for him....’

Dickey told Kaddu, ‘you all please go home in my car. I will look up this Prakash Agarwal .George is waiting there keeping tabs on him.’

Mouli stayed back,

I will go with you.

Dickey did not argue. He simply walked ahead towards the hotel. George had put his men all-round the hotel and all floors. They recognised Dickey and waved to him. 'First floor, Dickey. He has got three men with him. George saab is in a room opposite, waiting for you. George would not allow us to take him on. He said you have some plans for him”

Okay, Arun. Thank you. Just Stay put here and do not allow anyone to surprise us once we are inside.

Dickey walked ahead. They took the stairs to the first floor. The hotel looked deserted .George had told every guest to get out, including the hotel staff. He told the guests, that some terrorists have gained access into the hotel and anti-terrorist squad is moving in. The hotel owner was worried. George assured him that there won't be any damage to the hotel. Just stay away for one day. Come in the morning and take over and do not talk too much.

Dickey whistled and he heard the response from a room on the left. He turned to the left and saw George sitting on a chair, facing the opposite room... He had a gun in his hand .George saw Dickey, got up from his chair and gave a bear hug with a genuine happiness of seeing a great friend. “Good to see you, chotu. Your man is in that room with three other people. I think he is worried because the telephone in his room has been disconnected. He may not know what is happening outside. He possibly knows that kidnapping a judge is an offence. He has come to the end of the road. There may not be much of fight left in him if he knows that the judge has been rescued from his captivity. So be careful.”

Dickey nodded.

If he knocked on the door, he would possibly receive a bullet through the door. So he fell to the floor and pushed a chair against the door and kept banging it against the door making a racket. The door opened suddenly and a bulky gent holding a gun stood at the door. He looked up to see Mouli standing and he raised his gun to shoot .He had not seen Dickey on the floor. Dickey yanked the leg violently making the man fall on his back and his shots went through roof. He fell with a thud damaging his head in the process. Mouli walked through the door , picking the gun that had slipped from the goon's hand. two other men rushed recklessly to see why there was SHOOTING. They were holding their guns in hand ready to shoot, but were surprised to see Mouli with a gun. He shot their guns out of their hands and ran into a staggering Prakash Agarwal. Mouli grabbed him fast and pushed him on the bed face down and taking a belt tied the hands .Then he yanked him back on his feet and marched him out of the room. George's men appeared all over the place and quickly tied him with ropes. George sent a call to police hq informing the IG office that Deputy police commissioner has arrested Prakash Agarwal.

Next week the case against Prakash Agarwal came up for final hearing. Judge Vikram sentenced Agarwal to a ten year simple Imprisonment.

Chapter 7

Ashok Reddy smiled to himself as he recalled the stories he had heard about Dickey at different places. His admiration for Dickey bordered on hero worship at its extreme. He considered himself to be most fortunate to be so close to Dickey and be at his beck and call. With great effort, he brought his mind back to Sathish Agarwal. His immediate task was to find out if there was any connection between the Agarwals Prakash and Satish

The address given by RTO, was one of those preferred by the most affluent segment of society the business tycoons and elite of that type. Slowly he worked his way till he came to the exact address. On the way he talked to vendors, service providers and security personnel of neighbouring houses. He posed himself as one making a credit check on the Agarwals. "were't there two of them Sathish and Prakash?" he had asked innocently and He hit pay dirt.

The vendor was talkative "Yes, you are right. There were two of them. The elder one was Prakash. He died in the jail after suffering a massive heart Attack. Sathish is the younger one. He is making waves. Watch out, he will take the world by storm, sooner or later. just wait and see.

You are making a credit check on Sathish Agarwal? That is a joke man. Sathish owns half of Hyderabad especially the new sectors that are opening out."

Ashok said, "you never know. These big rich bastards never pay their bills in time. That is why we run credit check frequently."

Are there any ladies in the house?

Yes, There are. A wife and a sister who visits frequently. then there are children. It is a big house hold.

Sister?

Yes, Sathish has a sister, who is a principal of a big school.

Just as he was coming to the end of an informative conversation, Ashok saw a car hurry down the road and enter the compound of Agarwal's house. Ashok could see that the car was being driven by Nalini.

He decided it was time to report this matter to Dickey.

Dickey heard Ashok Without interrupting. Then he said, "That means Nalini has gained entry to our school with a motive. If it is revenge that she is seeking, then why wait for such a long time. What is she after?"

Ashok said, "Sathish is an up and coming business man. Getting control of a good school is a very sound business option. Possibly he wanted to consolidate his position before striking. That would surprise you. Good strategy."

'Let us contact Kaddu and find out if she has any ideas about it'

Kaddu was excited the moment Dickey mentioned Satish Agarwal's name. "Yes, I have been keeping tabs on him. He has been busy consolidating his position in the business. I expect him to make his move against us any time. I was only wondering about the delay. Has he done anything to upset you?"

'He has taken Shanta's carpet.'

"Uh uh. How?"

'Nalini'

"How?"

'Nalini happens to be his sister, A fact that none of us knew. I think she conned us successfully to take up a job as Principal of our school. Good strategy.'

My God. You are in a nice soup. what are you going to do now? What do you think they are after.?

The school, obviously.

Are'nt you stretching a little too far?

No. If revenge is the real motive, taking over the school is the most desired option. That is the way to hit back at the core issue, the founder of the school late judge Vikram. They have snatched Shanta's treasured possession, the bejewelled carpet. They will think of some other way to hit vikram's son.. Possibly they will snatch his daughter or some trick like that.

Do You think sathish and Nalini are not alone.?

Prakash had good connection with political bigwigs. When we put Prakash away, some political party also got hurt. They would like to get even. School is

a good money spinner. It would be very good asset for them , a cash cow.The party may be pushing Sathish.

Presently Sathish is doing reasonably well. His hotel and courier service are doing very well. He may not be interested in school by himself. He may also be under pressure.

Dickey, you are running this school to help ex servicemen, disabled soldiers, war widows and orphans. What will happen to them?

Kaddu,, remember , this is not my school. This is our school.

Of course. Dickey take it easy. what do you want to do now.

I will go after Nalini..She will break easily.

Good Idea, Dickey. call me if you need any of my skills.

Okay, will meet you at home.

Chapter 8.

Nalini was surprised to receive the call from Dickey. She agreed to meet him at the school, the following day. She informed Sathish about the call. Sathish was excited. He said, 'That is good, Nalini. You stay put in your seat at the school. I will make a pitch to the chairman of school, Col. Prabhu at the club. If he agrees to take us as partners in the school holding, we will make some progress. So go ahead with your date with that Gurkha. They said he was tough. A small issue of a cheap carpet is going to bring him down with a thud.' He laughed like a Hindi film villain.

Next day, Nalini made her way to school straight from the beauty parlour looking fresh and smelling divine. Dressed in a saree and typical Indian looks, she looked very charming.

Dickey decided that he would not let Nalini know that he knew about her relationship with Prakash Agarwal and that he would question her as though he was still worried about returning Shanta's carpet.

Nalini denied point blank that she knew anything about Shanta's carpet. She maintained that Stella was not telling the truth. She confessed to the fact that she knew Sathish Agarwal. As a responsible Principal of a well-reputed school, it was obligatory on her part to maintain a conducive relationship with influential people like Sathish Agarwal. She maintained such a relationship with many other business tycoons and such relationships did help the school to gain more recognition, more honour. So it is not right to view her relationship with Sathish with any hint of suspicion.

Dickey heard all this with a straight face.

He said, "Nalini I have heard all that you said about Sathish. I am not interested in Sathish. I am interested in knowing about Shanta's carpet. I have spoken to Aarti and she swears that the carpet was given to you in person, you admired it and said it would make a great exhibit. Are you telling me that the child is also lying. She is sitting in the next room and I will call her in to confront you." Dickey paused a little and raised his voice, "Would you like to be called a liar by a fifteen-year-old?"

Nalini was silent.

You received the carpet from Aarti, did you or not?

She remained silent.

“Nalini, I want you to answer my question.” Dickey’s tone had changed totally. He was not trying to be nice any more. He walked around the desk and stood very close to her. Nalini distinctly got the impression that he was going to slap her.

Softly she said, ‘Yes. Aarti had given her exhibit to me.’

“Good, you are now talking. Tell me where is it now?”

‘I gave it Sathish Agarwal’

“Why?”

‘In fact, he bought it. He visited my office just after Aarti left. The item was still on my desk. He saw it and was captivated by its beauty and highly skilled craftsmanship. He wanted to have it at any cost. He is a collector of such items. The item was given for exhibition and auction. He wanted to buy it. So I gave it to him.’

“Did he pay for it?”

‘Not yet. He can be trusted to pay.’

“Why did you lie about it in the first place?”

‘Why are you so keen on getting that damned thing back for that old hag?’

“She is not any old hag. She is a friend. She and her late Husband were the original promoters of this school. We owe it to her to get back what belongs to her and what was given away by you without her knowledge or permission..

Let it be so. You have given it to Sathish. He has not paid for it so far. So please get it back from him. simple, isn’t it?”

“No, not so simple. I can not ask for it”

‘why not?’

“I am afraid. I am afraid for the school. I know he is a dangerous man. I am afraid of what all he can do.’

‘Afraid? What can he possibly do?’

“A lot .”

Like?

“We dare not antagonise him. He can protect us and our school. These days police can not give adequate protection. We need influential people for our own security”

’Bull shit. Tell me what are you afraid of ?’

“Many things.”

Nalini, tell me what all he can do.

“Some body may ram our school bus carrying children.”

And?

“Some one may mix laxative in the drinking water tank to make our students fall ill.”

What else?

“He may cause an explosion in our lab, he may kidnap some of our teachers”.

‘Nalini , are you trying to scare me?’

Do you know anything about me?

Do you know that I put Prakash Agarwal away for good?’

“Exactly. That is the reason for my fear. If we do not humour him , he will harm us in more than one way. Giving away a cheap carpet to buy peace is not a sin”.

“It is a sin. It is a sin to be afraid. It is a sin to lie to an elderly soul who did no harm to you.”

“Prakash died in the jail. Somebody put him there. There is a debt to be squared. That is what Sathish is telling”.

“Okay Nalini. I do not wish to continue this talk any more. I give you twenty four hours to get that carpet back here. You seem to know sathish rather well .So you should not find it difficult to contact him and get Shanta’s item, from him. If you fail to do that, I will personally go after Sathish. You can tell him that. Now you can go.

Nalini sat silently for some time. Then she got up and walked away.

Chapter9

Col Prabhu was concentrating on his cards trying to decide how to beat the contract of 4 no trumps, in a card game in the seniors section of the cosmopolitan club where he played game of bridge with his Army friends. Suddenly the club Secretary came upto the table, apologised for interrupting the game and asked if the colonel would give time to meet another member of club after his game was over. Colonel did not like the interruption as his concentration was disturbed and suddenly he lost interest and gave the game away with out a fight missing a sure trick in the process. The secretary appeared again with Sathish Agarwal and introduced him to colonel. Col was a gentleman to the core shaking the guest's hands .He ordered a round of drinks and politely asked Sathish Agarwal if they had met some place earlier. Sathish said no, he had not had the pleasure before. He seemed genuinely happy to meet the colonel. He said in a friendly tone, "I only know you as the chairman of the best school in the city. When I came to know that you are also a member of this club ,I could not hold myself back. I insisted that our secretary should arrange for our meeting and here I am shaking hands with you."

Col made appropriate noises in response. He suddenly became very alert as he felt Agarwal was going to make himself unpleasant very soon. Sathish continued, "Sir, I am having interest in hospitality, communications and building materials. I am doing very well and have put away considerable amount of money for welfare measures just like you and your friends. I have visited your school and met with your Principal .I am very impressed and thought I should somehow associate with your school in some manner. That is the objective in my mind. Can you suggest some thing."

What sort of association are you aiming at?

"Normally , I buy myself a sizeable share and tell my lawyers to manage an acquisition of controlling interest. That is the way , I have built up my business. I am related to Birlas in a remote way and business runs in my family.. But school is a new business for me. Your team is doing a very good job and I would not want to disturb that. I just would like to be involved in a small way , if you can permit."

Col knew which way the talk was heading

Mr Agarwal, the school is not being run with any profit motive .It is an association of a few chosen closely linked , likeminded people. It is an activity we have chosen to support a good cause , welfare of retired personnel from Army, disabled soldiers, war widows and orphans related to the slain soldiers .It is not a company in that sense for you to be able to buy yourself a share in it. Yes, if you wish to make a donation or sponsor some scholarship for the students, we will be happy to accept. But to be a part of our board or aspire to be party to run or take over the school, it is not possible.

“But you took over an existing school?”

No we did not take over any thing.We were invited by the promoters family to run the school on their behalf and to this day we are doing just that.

“Should I contact that family?”.

You can , but they will refer you to me and I have already explained to you that there is no scope for any outside party to get in.

“You mean , it is tight holding.”

You can describe it any way you like.

“But I want to do some thing.”

Yes, You can do a great deal for the school, but to aspire to take over and run the school , there is no scope

“Col, I have expressed my wish. I will take all steps acceptable to the corporate world to acquire your school.

I will also approach the Government machinery and educational ministry to help us to get a role in the school. By the by, any government representation is present in the board?”

Mr.Agarwal, our school does not take any aid from the government, so there is no need for their representation .

“You may be interacting with some government agencies for approvals, accreditation and participation in board examination, assessments , inspection etc”

Yes, we do follow all rules and guidelines and are maintaining excellent working relationship with government.

Ok, I am clear now. I just wanted you to know of my interest in your school.

Your interest is noted

Sathish stood up and extended his hand to take leave, “Nice meeting you Colonel. Please consider what I said about my wanting to take an interest in the school. I will be in touch with you.”

He did not wait for the colonel to say anything in response. He walked away holding his head held high.

Colonel cursed him in the choicest Hindi. But He was worried. He had to alert Dickey who was looking at the affairs of the school on day to day basis. He was not aware that Dickey was already neck deep in the trouble.

Chapter10

At Friend's nest, full quorum was present around the Dinner table and a war council was on. The topic of the evening was, of course, Sathish. Vittal and Raju took up observer status maintaining a decent silence while George was actively involved in the discussions. Kaddu was explaining and Dickey put on an unpleasant scowl on his face and the Colonel, the head of the household, was conducting the discussion. He was surprised to learn that Kaddu and Dickey were already aware of Sathish, more so about Nalini. He put one on one and decided that Sathish was out to take a subtle revenge On Shanta and Dickey for what happened to Prakash Agarwal years back.

He warned Dickey, "Dickey. It is a sticky situation. Your usual style of hit and run can not work here. How do you plan to take sathish out?"

Dickey said, 'presently, getting Shanta's carpet back is what I am working on. I have found out that Nalini got into our school management with a motive. Her relationship with Sathish is also now in the open. On top of all that now we know that Sathish is aspiring for a share in our school. So the picture is clearly one of outright confrontation. Nalini has already hinted at what all Sathish is capable of doing. We will watch what he does. We may have to take a few hits initially because we have to make him commit mistakes first. Then only we can justify what ever action we have to take.'

Col' 'Dickey, you better brief your friend Mouli in the police department.' He then looked at Vittal and said "Vittal, can you brief IG-P, so that he can be prepared for some noisy action in the streets and arrange for discrete monitoring of Sathish Agarwal's movements for next few days.'

He then turned to George, "George, please alert your boys to keep their eyes and ears open to pick up any street gossip. Also make sure that School bus drivers are also alerted. Let some armed escort be arranged for some time with clear instructions that arms to be used on grave provocation.

Ashok Reddy called a meeting of all school bus drivers and briefed them to be extra careful considering the fact that certain vested interests are out to make trouble for the school. There could be attempts to hit the buses and cause damage. So from now onwards every bus will travel with a pilot motor cyclist

in front and one at the back. They will be in constant touch with School. Police have been informed and they will cooperate .

One day before school re opening day after the vacation, they all went through a mock drill simulating an attack on the bus

Ashok Reddy was confident that his men would handle any situation on the road. But yet when the attack came he was caught totally by surprise because the attack came right in his own turf , well with in the school complex.. All the six buses were knocked out in their parking stations. A kilo load of sugar was emptied in every petrol /diesel tank and fuel injection system were stymied. The drivers were totally surprised by the development happening just a few minutes they were all ready to roll out on various routes to pick up school children. It all pointed to an insider whose loyalties were suspect. Ashok wanted to find out the insider quickly before he could do more damage. As a matter of routine and reported the matter to the police.The school administration was advised to quickly send SMS alerts to all parents about break down of transport service and declaring an unscheduled holiday to avoid inconvenience to students.

Police responded promptly by deputing Chief Inspector Kamath to help in the investigation.Kamath a great Fan of Dickey was forth right in his comments. He said, ‘Look here Ashok, you don’t have to feel so low. Your staff is all loyal to you and Dickey coming as they are from Army. You just concentrate on those staff who have been recruited from the civil society. I would start looking at any staff appointed by Nalini as Principal .Line them up for my questioning. I will identify the culprit in two minutes flat, trust me’

They hit pay dirt immediately. There were 5 ayahs recruited by Nalini and one male staff to help Nalini as a personal attendant and , who also doubled as her occasional Driver. So he knew how to go about putting car machines out of order. He was made to stand in front of Inspector Kamath.

What is your name?

Govind Agrwal.

One of the poorer cousins of Sathish Agarwal?

Silence.

Answer me , are you related to Sathish Agarwal.

No .

The room resounded with a noise of a hard slap and a painful scream.

Take off your shirt and Pant. I want to search your clothes. The man protested and soon was he was writhing on the floor in great pain as his legs were powerfully kicked and Ashok kicked him in stomach.

The man would not talk.

Ashok grabbed the man by his hair and made him stand up. His clothes were peeled off from his body and he was left standing semi naked.

Kamath told him, 'If you do not tell in the next few minutes ,I will strip you naked, tie you to my police jeep and drag you on the road all the way upto Sathish Agarwal's house and dump you at his door step. Then I will drag Sathish out of his house and tie you two together and drag you both to the police station where you will be charged with conspiracy to kill school children. You will get a minimum of twenty years of rigorous imprisonment. If you talk and sign a statement mentioning that you damaged the school vehicles as per instructions of Satish Agarwal who paid you ten thousand rupees for doing so ,then you can go home and live happily.. The choice is yours.

Then there is another matter. So far, you have been worked over by the mild mannered Ashok Reddy and me. In another ten minutes, Major Dickey will arrive here and he has his own methods of making reluctant people talk. When he finishes his work, the reluctant man will be so enthusiastic, that he will put seasoned politicians to shame.

Kamath came up with a paper and pen ,forced Govind to sit at a table and placed the writing material in front of him He instructed him to start writing., Govind , now totally dis oriented due to severe beating at the hands of Ashok and Kamath dashed of a confession statement as dictated by Kamath and signed it with a flourish.. Once the statement was in hand, Kamath marched the dazed man off and pushed him into his police jeep and drove off to the police station.

Dickey arranged with Jehangir's garage to send mechanics to drain the adulterated diesel from all the buses and clean up the engines so that the buses could be used to pick up the children as usual.

Next day, two of the school buses were rammed from behind. Thirteen young children suffered injuries. It was sensational front page news stuff for all newspapers. One of the reporters had filed in a scathing attack on school efficiency, poor condition of buses and drunken drivers becoming perils on the roads. National Model school once paragon of virtues was portrayed as an institution with eroding reputation and falling values.

Dickey read one newspaper after another with increasing anger. There was no report about the vehicles or the criminals who caused the accidents. His lips were closed tight. He clenched his fist and punched the wall. The fresh coat of paint was smudged and wall got disfigured due to cracks in the paintwork.

Ashok Reddy had anticipated this. Even though he could not prevent the accident, his men who were escorting the buses on their motor bikes, had given chase to offending vehicles, took photographs of vehicle, number plate and drivers. They got to know all about the owners of those vehicles and their plot to damage the school buses.

Chapter 11

Police commissioner Chandra Mouli was sitting at the dining table in Friend's nest, savaging a plate of hot samosas. Dickey and Kaddu were sitting at the opposite side of table watching him. In between mouthfuls he asked,

"Do you want me to pull him in before he does any more serious damage to your school. You showed me a long list of what all he could do?"

Dickey spoke calmly. "Except for confession made by Govind, we cannot connect him to the accidents. I do not know how he is doing it."

Mouli; "He does not have to do it using his own men. There are so many goon squads out for hire. There are many, ever ready to please him. These tycoons know how to protect themselves."

Dickey; "so what do you suggest?"

Mouli ; "return the compliment"

Dickey, "What do you mean?"

Mouli, ";Mow the bastard down. Ram his bloody car. Toss a grenade in his bedroom. Do something. Hurt him back. Scare him silly."

Dickey; "Mouli, we are trying to run a good school. You are suggesting ways to close it down fast.

Let us think this matter over."

Dickey, "it is not at all like you think. You know who is behind all this mess. Go smash his face like you always do. These fat businessmen are afraid of physical pain. They are great at remote control. But once the violence comes too close to their person, they start thinking. You have become soft Dickey like your school children and school teachers. I will go and meet him. See how I push him."

He pushed the plate away and stood. He was six feet tall and built like a boxer. If he pushed anything, it would not be standing straight any more

"Where is he making more money?" Dickey threw a question.

He has franchise for Fedex Courier and a chain of budget hotels across the country.

Next morning newspapers carried news of four Fedex courier offices going up in flames.

Security staff in hotel chain belonging to Agarwal group suddenly went on strike and their computer link up was flooded with virus attack destroying all data.

Income tax department launched a concerted drive to investigate the business practices of the group.

Dickey waited. There was no reaction. Normalcy was being restored. Does it mean the enemy was withdrawing from his stated objectives of hurting the school and taking it over for personal satisfaction?

Dickey thought it was time to make a personal call on Sathish Agarwal. Beard the lion in his own den. That has been his style.

Dickey informed Mouli that he was visiting Sathish Agarwal. Mouli informed him that a plainclothes man of rank of Chief Inspector will be in close vicinity of the quarry's house and he will be available for any help. He wished Dickey happy hunting.

Dickey took Ashok Reddy along with him. Ashok drove the car. He opened the glove compartment and checked that his service Revolver was in its place with a spare clip of bullets. Dickey had concealed his kukri in his backside. He hoped there won't be any need for rough stuff. But he was prepared. At 65 years, he was still very strong and very agile. But mentally he had become somewhat soft, but call for battle roused his senses and as a known warrior, he was well prepared to go beyond all restraints to put out a threat.

They had reached the massive gates of Agarwal house. Ashok pressed the horn and a medium size Gurkha in khaki uniform pushed the door open. He saw Dickey and saluted. Dickey had this effect on all Gurkhas. He was a demigod for all Gurkas, as the most decorated war hero. Dickey saluted and stepped out of car. He patted the guard on his back and made polite enquiries about his welfare. That pleased the guard. Dickey then asked if Sathish Agarwal sahib was in. Knowing Dickey's reputation, the guard asked Dickey if there was going to be any rough stuff. He wanted to decide on his loyalties before hand. Not wanting to subject the guard to any heart burn on his account, Dickey assured the guard that his work with Agarwal was a peaceful one.

The guard asked Dickey and Ashok Reddy to walk upto the main house. The main house was a huge mansion. The main door opened onto a sprawling living room with high ceiling like in olden days and from the ceiling, exquisite chandeliers were hanging on brass chains. Great painting by old Indian masters decorated the walls. The floor was covered by Persian Carpets and trophies from hunting activities of colonial period were installed , duly illuminated by special lighting. The furniture was top class. The walls were painted in very fascinating combination of colours. The whole scene smacked of affluence and style. Dickey had informed Sathish Agarwal of his visit, so Dickey expected him to be in the house. He had heard the telephone ring and guessed that the guard was announcing his arrival. While they waited for someone to show up, Nalini stepped out of one of the side rooms. She was draped in typical Agarwal style sari complete with accessories. Her head was partly covered by the sari as per Agarwal tradition. Her fair forehead was decorated with a red bindi one size too large. Diamonds dazzled from her ears and round her neck.

Nalini nearly got a heart attack when she saw all of a sudden Dickey and Ashok in that house. She recovered fast saying. "you could have phoned before coming here."

Dickey retorted, "I am equally shocked to see you here. By the by, you really look very smart in typical Indian dress. Actually my business is with Sathish Agarwal.. Still I would very much like to know what you are doing here."

'I do not see why you should be so shocked. I am here because I belong here.

Sathish Agarwal is my brother.'

"Uh, Uh. How did I miss that? "Ashok Reddy kept a straight face.

When we interviewed you for the Principal's post, you kind of forgot to tell us about your relationship. Did 'nt you? .You said you lived alone and were divorced. Was that also a lie?'

No that is true. I have my own place in the city. But I visit this place during holidays and festival times. Does Sathish know you are here?'. She asked with concern

'Yes, He knows we are here.'

Have you come in connection with the Shanta's carpet?

Yes, You are right.

I have told you all about it.

We have not come here to talk to you. You said you have given it to sathish. So we have to take it from him. So please tell him to come here to meet us. We do not have much time.

Sathish dressed in silk pyjamas and kurta glided into the room silently. The diamond studded buttons of his Kurta were linked to a gold chain. He looked flushed. Odour of high quality scotch was overpowering. Still he looked in control.

Nalini felt she should introduce the visitors to her brother. She said, “Sathish, these gentlemen are from the school where I work. This is Mr. Dickey Director of the school and this one is Ashok Reddy, the security chief”

Oh, from the school, is it. Out to collect donation for the school?” he asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“No, I have come here to kick your Ass.” Dickey turned to Nalini and said, “A correction please, you were working. We sacked you with effect from last week. A letter has already been mailed to your address. But that is another matter. Just now, I am interested in getting hold of Sathish Agarwal...”

Here I am, what do you want to do with me?

“Can you please hand over the Carpet?” Dickey was polite.

“Which carpet. I do not deal in carpets, you know”. Sathish was stalling.

“Sathish, I do not like to play games. please hand it over to me, now.” Dickey took a step forward. He was well within striking range.

Sathish; “why should I know any thing about it?”

“Your sister has confessed that she gave it away to you and you offered to pay 3 lacs for it. You are the type to collect such articles of value. You have not paid for it. In the first place, it was not for sale. So please return the material”

Do You have any proof that it is with me, other than what my lying sister has told you?. Sathish asked

I do not have to prove anything. I know you have it. I have every intention of walking out of your house with that article in my hand..

Before coming over to this place I stopped at the police station to submit a complaint against you. There is a register maintained at the school listing all articles submitted for display at the exhibition. The register shows movement of goods in and out of the school lockers. The register has an entry stating that Nalini asked for that article and signed for it. So far, she has not returned it. There is a sound recording evidence that contains a statement by Nalini that you offered to pay three lacs for that article and you have not made any payment so far as per school accountant.. She allowed you to take the article out of the school premises expecting you to pay within a reasonable amount of time. You have not paid for it as on date, so we have every right to demand its return back to school.

Further we have photographs that prove that you were trying to sell that article to the members of Cosmopolitan club. Mr. Jehangir, a member of the club has made a bid for that. That proves that you were trying to sell an article that in the first place does not belong to you.

I now accuse you of stealing a carpet belonging to Mrs Shanta Vikram from the school and trying to sell that article in public. That, in my book, is a crime. I am quite prepared to condone it if you return the article back.

Police are waiting for my signal to move in here and make an arrest. Between you and your sister, you can decide which one is going to jail.

Sathish stood glaring and roared back, "I am quite capable of protecting myself from you and the police. There is nothing to prove that the carpet in my possession belongs to school. I will show you how I deal with people who foolishly accuse me of stealing. I am rich and can buy anything that pleases me. You can not make accusations against me without power to back it up. I know of your contacts in the police department. I can nullify the police support you enjoy with my political influence. I will put you away myself."

Two men appeared suddenly. Typical Bollywood goons dressed for the occasion in leather goods. They had their hands in their pockets. Dickey could see the bulge of their hands around the butt of the gun. Ashok and Dickey moved away from each other to present two separate targets in case shooting

started. Dickey said, "Sathish, you are being very foolish. These goons can not stop me.'

Nalini was standing close by. In one fast move, Dickey lifted Nalini bodily and threw her on the two men who were taking the gun out of their pockets. Nalini screamed as she slammed into the men and a gun went off. Bullet passed through the body of one of the goons. Dickey dealt with the other man. His kukri was in his hand. The goon was confused with his gun going off and dropping his friend. He was a little late in preventing the blade from slashing his fore arm. Screaming in pain, he dropped the gun and was clutching his bleeding hand. He had never seen so much of blood before .He collapsed on the floor and Dickey stood over him with a blood stained kukri in hand.

Ashok Reddy caught up with Sathish and in a swift judo throw brought the big man down and put his massive feet over his chest crushing Sathish down. Dickey moved towards sathish waving the still dripping blade in front of his eyes.

"where is it?" He asked

'I will get it.' said Nalini. She walked towards one of the rooms. Dickey followed her. She opened one of the cupboards and took out a transparent polythene bag containing the carpet .

Dickey took it and held it close to his chest." You could have saved so much trouble by giving it before", He said..

He walked away from her. Ashok joined him leaving a stunned Sathish behind.

They walked towards their car. Gurkha appeared. Dickey showed him the parcel and said, 'it is okay Bahadur. I came to collect this item. You can go in. The boss wants some help."

They were soon driving away. Dickey called Mouli to report and the plainclothesman from police department was advised to move away.

Chapter 12

Back at Shanta's house, the whole family had gathered in the drawing room. Dickey handed over the carpet to shanta. She took it in hand and held it close to her heart.

She looked at Dickey and smiled.

He had done it again.

Dickey made a gallant bow, going down on one knee and grabbing her hand. Tenderly he kissed the shapely fingers.

'Shanta, I am getting old. I can not waste rest of my life bailing you out of trouble. So please let me go'

Shanta said softly in his ears, 'You are the one holding on to my hand. You have to decide to let it go or not. And we all know what a great decision maker you are. For all your bulk, in the brains department you are still lagging. I love you, nevertheless. Now get up from the floor and give me a tight hug''

Dickey obliged as told.

That is Dickey for you, ever available, for ever helpful and for ever loving.

Let us say Amen to that.