

The Delhi Directive

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Once You're Marked,
There's No Escape

Anirudhya Mitra

 **Juggernaut**

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*To my late father, Anil Mitra, and my late mother, Nilima Mitra,
whose love and values shaped everything I write.*

And to all those men and women who serve this nation from the shadows. The nameless, faceless spies, operatives, assets and handlers who live and die for the country without ever being known. They work like ghosts. No medals, no applause. Many of them are erased from files, their names blacked out from official records.

A former intelligence chief once said that a spy agency is known by its failures. Maybe that is true in the eyes of the world. But those who have seen them work know that their successes are far greater and far more frequent. Only, they cannot be spoken of.

This book is for them, the invisible protectors of India, who remain in the dark so that the rest of us can live in light.

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Preface

Writing about extrajudicial killings is like walking a tightrope suspended over an abyss of denial and secrecy. No nation openly admits to carrying them out, and yet the shadows of such actions are cast across the world. Consider the assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan: a surgical operation by the United States that was broadcast to the world with pride. The motives were clear – to avenge the humiliation of 9/11 and to restore America's image as an unassailable superpower. It was a rare moment when the cloak of covert action was cast aside for all to see. But such moments are exceptions, not the rule.

India's story is different. Traditionally, Indian governments have cloaked themselves in deniability, their silence as calculated as their actions. This strategy began to shift in 2014, when a new government rose to power, emphasizing nationalism and decisive leadership. Covert operations, long shrouded in secrecy, began to take on a different hue. Public celebrations of the surgical strikes after Uri and the airstrikes after Pulwama marked a dramatic shift, with the narrative amplified at political rallies to project strength. Statements like '*Ghar mein ghus ke maare hain ... ghar mein ghus ke marenge* [We entered their homes and killed them ... we will do so again]' became rallying cries before elections.

This was not to suggest that earlier governments were passive. On the contrary, India's intelligence agencies have a long history

of taking decisive covert actions. For instance, in 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government established a specialized division called 'J' within R&AW to tackle cross-border terrorism. Extrajudicial killings were not unheard of during that era, but they were decisively brushed under the carpet. The difference today is stark: covert actions are often presented as overt, repackaged to gain political mileage on the domestic front.

Meanwhile, when allegations about India's role in these actions have arisen, whether from adversaries like Pakistan or even from Western allies, the responses have been calibrated. Leaders have publicly denied any involvement, maintaining diplomatic decorum. But the juxtaposition of these denials with the celebratory political rhetoric has painted a complex picture. India, it seemed, was rewriting the rulebook of covert operations balancing denial with a visible narrative of strength that resonated with its domestic audience.

In June 2023, the Canadian prime minister's claim of a 'credible allegation' linking India's spy agency, R&AW, to the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian Sikh, set off a geopolitical firestorm. Overnight, the narrative changed. Suddenly, the world's gaze turned sharply towards India. Pakistan's long-ignored allegations found a new audience. Security agencies in the UK, the US and Australia raised alarms, concerned about the implications for mutual trust. And though the American government remained measured in its public rhetoric, whispers began circulating about a failed attempt on Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a Khalistani leader in New York. The shadows that India had so carefully navigated were now starkly illuminated.

The media pounced, eager to connect the dots. Yet the details were frustratingly scarce. The killings, whether in Pakistan, the UK or Canada, followed a near-identical script: masked assailants on motorbikes, swift and brutal, vanishing without a trace. Social media erupted with speculation, every night bringing a new name to the rumour mill. Was Masood Azhar eliminated? Was Dawood Ibrahim poisoned in Karachi? Was Syed Salahuddin shot? The truth remained elusive, but the list of confirmed killings grew steadily, reaching over twenty-five by the end of 2023.

This was the world I found myself drawn into. Having left investigative journalism in 1994 for a career in television and films, I thought my days of chasing such stories were behind me. But the fascination of these mysterious operations proved irresistible. I called up old contacts, digging for answers, but hit a wall of silence. 'You know how it works,' they told me. Those who spoke did so off the record, warning of the risks of exposing such secrets. Even my most trusted sources were unwilling to confirm anything outright.

The deeper I dug, the more I realized how extraordinary this story was. Not just because of the killings themselves, but because of what they revealed about a shifting global order. India was no longer playing by the old rules. It had become a force to reckon with, a nation that could act decisively and, apparently, with impunity. This was no longer the India of the 1980s or 1990s. This was a new India, unapologetic in the pursuit of its interests.

But how could I tell this story? With no proof, no on-the-record statements and a thousand potential landmines, I knew a direct account was impossible. That's when the idea struck: what if I told it as fiction? A fictional truth, inspired by real events but unconstrained by the demands of evidence. When I proposed this to a few insiders, there was a long silence ... and then, slowly, they began to talk. What followed was a journey into a world of covert operations and geopolitical chess games, a world both exhilarating and deeply unsettling.

The Delhi Directive is the result of that journey. Writing it was not just an exploration of geopolitics but a deeply immersive experience. The story reflects the complexities of modern espionage, blending real-world inspiration with a gripping fictional narrative that feels both authentic and urgent.

Among the characters, the one who captivated me the most was the national security director (NSD), the chief architect and mastermind behind the plan. For decades, even after retiring as the head of the Intelligence Bureau (IB), he meticulously kept track of the whereabouts of India's most wanted. His resolve never wavered; the targets remained firmly on his radar. All he needed was the political mandate to execute his vision. Enter Awasthy, whose vast

organizational network across the globe turned the NSD's blueprint into reality. With his sharp foresight and relentless determination, Awasthy ensured no one strayed from the mission's path.

But at the heart of the story is Aditya, the protagonist, who fights a dual battle. One against the enemies of the state and the other against the fractures in his personal life. His journey is not just about the missions he undertakes but also about the emotional and psychological toll of living in the shadows. Aditya's internal conflicts, his sacrifices and his resilience make him a character who lingers long after the story is told.

Equally compelling is Mridula, whose ethical stand in a world of disinformation and lies brought a unique tension to the narrative. Her struggle to uphold her principles in the face of overwhelming pressure highlights the moral cost of espionage. She is a reminder that even in the shadowy world of covert operations, conscience can be both a guide and a burden.

The narrative plunges you into high-stakes confrontations: a failed attempt on a Khalistani leader in New York, a dramatic standoff in Surrey and a network of spies unravelling in Germany and Australia. It delves into the corridors of power where decisions are made and secrets buried, from the clandestine operations of R&AW to the calculated moves of intelligence agencies in Washington, London and Ottawa. You will meet characters forced to choose between loyalty and survival, and duty and humanity, their choices shaping a volatile global landscape.

In this novel, I have tried to capture the fine line between national interests and international norms, inviting readers to reflect on the moral ambiguities of extrajudicial actions. It explores not just the missions but also their ramifications, the power dynamics, the quiet ruthlessness of backroom decisions and the humanity behind the shadows.

This is not a story of heroes and villains. It is a story of shadows, where light and darkness blend, and where every choice carries a cost. As you turn the pages, you will encounter layered intrigue, strategic plotting and high-stakes drama. A mirror to the fractured world we live in.

The war in the shadows has begun. Will you step into the light?

Prologue

The Zabeel Palace loomed in the heart of Dubai, a fortress of luxury and power, crowned with golden domes. The residence of the prime minister of the UAE stood as a legacy of wealth and authority, where decisions that shaped the region were made within its ornate walls. Below, the city lights shimmered like a sea of jewels scattered across the desert, their glow softening the edges of the otherwise silent night.

The desert heat clung to the air, wrapping the palace in a blanket of stillness, broken only by the occasional murmur of distant traffic and the whisper of a warm breeze. It was a night like any other, a façade of tranquillity.

In a particular wing of the palace, the lights began to dim, one after another. This was where the ruler, the prime minister, withdrew for rest, and with each light extinguished, the end of the day approached. The rhythm of the palace's slumber was almost ritualistic, a slow surrender to the night's silence.

Yet, in the heart of this serenity, something stirred beneath the surface. The stillness wasn't peace. It was a mask.

The waters of the Arabian Sea stretched endlessly, reflecting the pale glow of the moon as it hung like a sentinel in the sky. The soft lapping of the waves against the hull of a sleek yacht created a rhythmic, almost hypnotic sound. Far from the bustling shores of

Goa, the yacht drifted silently in the international waters in the vast expanse of the ocean.

On the front deck, two figures huddled beneath oversized hoodies, their faces shadowed in the night's cool breeze. One of them was Princess Habiba, daughter of the prime minister of the UAE. She was a striking contrast to the luxury and opulence she was accustomed to. Just thirty-two, she was petite, with a loose ponytail that danced gently in the breeze, and eyes that were dark and intense, holding a fire of defiance. Tonight, she was not the princess of one of the world's richest families but a woman on the run.

Beside her sat Tiana George, a sturdy, no-nonsense Finnish martial-arts instructor. Years of training had sculpted her body into a weapon of strength, and her sharp gaze was ever watchful. She wasn't here for luxury or pleasure. Tiana was the one person Habiba trusted with her life, and that trust was about to be tested to its very limits.

For years, Princess Habiba, daughter of the prime minister of the UAE, had nurtured a secret. A secret if exposed, could shake the very foundations of her family's power. She had crafted the plan with precision, laying the groundwork step by step. What began as whispers of rebellion in her mind evolved into tangible action – training in extreme sports to build her endurance and agility, securing a fake passport that would carry her far from the grasp of her father's influence, and carefully smuggling cash to a shadowy network of conspirators who supported her in her desire for freedom.

By the time she entrusted her plan to Tiana George, her martial arts instructor and closest confidante, it was almost complete. Habiba had already arranged for a yachtsman, a discreet and loyal mercenary, to pick her up under the cover of night off the coast. His mission: to sail her away from the suffocating control of the UAE, to the shores of India or Sri Lanka, where she would disappear into the crowds. From there, she would take the final step of flying to the United States, the land where she could claim asylum and finally live on her own terms.

Every piece had been meticulously placed, but as the yacht sliced through the waters, Habiba knew that the most dangerous part of

the journey still lay ahead. This was her one chance for freedom. A chance she would not squander.

Habiba tapped swiftly on her phone, her fingers moving with a confidence that had been absent for years. She sent a message to a trusted friend: 'I really feel so free now. A walking target, yes, but totally free.'

Above her, in the captain's cabin, the middle-aged yachtsman stared intently at the GPS, his grizzled face illuminated by the soft green glow of the screen. He murmured to himself, 'Forty more miles, and we're home.' His voice carried a mixture of relief and caution because he knew the waters they navigated were fraught with risks.

One of the crew, perched with night vision binoculars, interrupted the captain's momentary respite. 'Captain, look,' the man said, pointing toward the sky. The captain followed his gaze, narrowing his eyes as he spotted the faint silhouette of a plane in the distance. Its quiet hum barely cut through the sound of the waves.

Meanwhile, on the front deck, Habiba tucked her phone into the pocket of her shorts and turned to Tiana with gratitude welling up in her eyes.

'I can't thank you enough for this, Tiana. I owe you my life,' Habiba said.

Tiana, ever composed and unflinching, gave a small smile. Her sturdy frame seemed even more reassuring in the moonlight.

'Habiba, I helped you escape so you could finally see the world for what it is without bars around you. I'm excited it's all coming together.'

'Promise me you'll stay with me, all the way to freedom?'

'Promise,' Tiana said. She yawned slightly, her exhaustion starting to catch up. 'But right now, it's time to catch up on some sleep. Come on.'

Habiba smiled, the weight of the world momentarily lifting from her shoulders. She lay back on the deck, gazing up at the stars, the endless sky a stark contrast to the gilded cage she had been trapped in for years.

'Let's fall asleep stargazing, just this once?' Habiba pleaded.

Tiana chuckled and reached down to pull her friend up.

'I'm tired, and there will be plenty of time to see the stars, believe me,' she said.

'Yes, but this time I won't be silenced,' Habiba replied. 'I'll wake up knowing I can do whatever I want, go wherever I want.'

Tiana gently pulled Habiba to her feet, her voice steady but kind: 'And you will. But for now, we need to rest.' The two women shared a quiet, understanding look before heading inside.

Just as they descended to their cabin, a sudden roar broke the peaceful night. A spotter plane from the Indian Coast Guard flew low over the yacht, its presence unmistakable. Inside, unaware of the danger closing in, Habiba brushed her teeth in the cramped bathroom, the noise outside muffled by the yacht's walls.

Beneath the surface of the sea, commandos emerged silently from the dark water, their eyes fixed on the vessel. The night was no longer just Habiba and Tiana's; it belonged to someone else now.

As Habiba stepped out of the cramped bathroom, the air exploded with a deafening burst of blasts. Above, feet landed on the deck in quick, wet thuds. The soft rubber soles of boarding boots slapped against metal as the commandos moved fast and low, water streaming off their suits.

'Tiana? What was that?' Habiba's voice trembled, her eyes wide.

'They've found us,' Tiana hissed, shoving Habiba back into the bathroom. In one smooth motion, she drew a gun from her waistband.

'No!' Habiba screamed, grabbing Tiana's arm and yanking her back inside before slamming the door shut. Her hands trembled as she frantically typed out a string of SOS messages on her phone, but deep down, she knew it might already be too late.

Smoke began to pour in through the air vents and light fixtures, creeping into the small space. The air turned thick and suffocating as they both struggled to breathe, each breath coming more painfully than the last.

'I'm sorry, Tiana,' Habiba sobbed, her tears falling fast. 'I'm so sorry ...' Tiana pulled her into a tight hug, her voice soft but resolute. 'We'll fight till the end, baby.'

With that, Tiana stepped forward and flung the door open, gun raised high. The darkness outside was instantly cut through by the sharp red lines of laser sights, crisscrossing through the air like deadly webs.

Tiana fired, her hand steady, but not with the precision of a professional. The bullets sprayed wildly, hitting nothing but shadows. She emptied the magazine far too soon, the echo of her last shot lingering in the air.

In a heartbeat, masked men stormed in, seizing both women with brutal efficiency. Their hands were bound tightly, their struggles meaningless against the overwhelming force. Dragged out to the deck, Habiba's eyes darted to the captain and crew, beaten and bound, their blood smeared across the wooden floor.

They forced her down, her hands tied cruelly behind her back. But Habiba fought, kicking, screaming, clinging desperately to the gunwales as they tried to haul her away. 'Shoot me here!' she shouted, her voice cracking. 'Don't take me back!'

It was pre-dawn, the usual time for the NSD, Bhuvan Rawat, to wake up and begin his morning yoga. The stillness of New Delhi at this hour always offered a sense of calm before the day's storm of responsibilities. But today was different. Today, his focus wasn't on tranquillity. It was on a princess caught in a dangerous game.

Standing by the window, he held his phone to his ear, his tone measured yet authoritative. 'Alright. Keep her safe on the Coast Guard ship. See if the princess needs any medical help.'

He hung up, his mind racing through the next steps, and immediately dialled another number. Moments later, the anxious voice of the prime minister of the UAE came through, barely masking his fear.

'Any news of my daughter?'

The NSD's voice was calm, assuring. 'No need to worry, Mr Prime Minister. The princess is in the safe custody of our forces. A doctor is attending to her, making sure she receives all necessary care after the rough ride at sea.'

Relief flooded the UAE prime minister's voice. 'Thank you so much. I can't express my gratitude enough.'

‘You’re welcome, Prime Minister. Rest assured, your daughter will be handed over to your forces at a designated point in international waters.’

There was a pause before the prime minister spoke again, this time his tone more composed. ‘Is there anything I can do in return? For India? For you? For the honourable prime minister?’

The NSD’s lips curled into a subtle smile. ‘For now, your daughter’s safety and well-being are our priority. When the time comes, I will not hesitate to ask.’

The phone call ended, but the seed had been planted. What seemed like a favour in the heat of the moment would have rippling consequences – consequences the prime minister of the UAE could not yet foresee. When the time came, the NSD would call in his favour, and it would be a request far more significant than anyone could have anticipated. The princess’s rescue was just the beginning of a much larger game, one that would soon unfold in ways neither country could predict.

1

Of Milk and Blood

14 February 2019.

The morning sun struggled to pierce through the dense fog that wrapped itself around the small rural town just outside Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. Inside a cosy home, the warmth from the hearth painted a stark contrast to the biting chill outside. A young mother moved quietly through the room, careful not to wake her sleeping son, Babloo, just yet. His small form was buried under a quilt, his innocent face peeking out as he dreamed in the comfort of their modest home.

She approached him with a glass of milk in hand, gently shaking him awake. 'Come on, Babloo,' she coaxed, her voice filled with the sweetness only a mother's love can hold.

Babloo stirred but didn't open his eyes. 'Get me Bournvita in the milk, or I won't get up,' he mumbled, his voice groggy with sleep.

The mother, with a smile, walked over to the cupboard only to find the Bournvita jar empty. 'Looks like a thief has polished off your Bournvita,' she teased, hoping to stir him out of his stubbornness.

Babloo pouted from beneath the quilt. 'Then I don't want it.' He pulled the quilt over his head, refusing to budge, much to his mother's growing frustration.

Her gaze flickered to the clock on the wall. 'Babloo, I just don't like your attitude,' she scolded gently, though there was still warmth in her tone. 'The van rickshaw to take you to school isn't going to wait forever.'

She set the glass of milk aside, sighing as she glanced out the window, the fog creeping closer, swallowing the morning whole.

At the same time, hundreds of kilometres away, in the heart of Jammu and Kashmir, the atmosphere was far from cozy. In a secluded hideout nestled in a remote village, the chill of the air seemed to seep through the very walls, mirroring the grim intent of the men inside.

Shakir Bashir, a hardened member of a terror group, sat hunched over a table, his face bathed in the dull glow of a solitary lamp. He stared at the maps spread out before him, the weight of the urgent message he'd just received heavy on his shoulders. The news was clear that the convoy of CRPF vehicles was scheduled to pass along the NH44 near Kakapora in Pulwama.

Time was running short.

He surveyed the map, eyes narrowing as they traced the routes leading to the highway. Only one path seemed viable: an unmonitored slip road, poorly guarded and easily accessible. He marked it carefully, circling the spot with precision.

Across the room, a younger boy, Adil Dar, listened intently, absorbing every word as Bashir laid out the plan. The cold in the room wasn't just from the weather, it was also the chill of impending violence, and both of them knew the magnitude of what was about to unfold.

Back in the quiet village in Uttar Pradesh, the mother sighed as she scrolled through her phone and dialled her husband Suresh. The morning wasn't going as smoothly as she'd hoped, and Babloo's refusal to get out of bed was only adding to her frustration. Suresh, a CRPF officer travelling in a convoy from Jammu to Srinagar, picked up her call with a broad smile, the familiar sound of his wife's voice warming his heart.

In the distance, Babloo sensed his mother's distraction. 'Are you calling Pappa?' he asked, peeking out from beneath the quilt.

Suresh could already see his wife's grumpy expression through the phone screen. 'Why do you look so upset this early in the morning?' he teased, the playful tone unmistakable.

'Because your pampered son doesn't want to go to school!' she retorted, pointing the phone towards Babloo. 'Now, talk to him.'

Suresh chuckled, his voice softening. 'Relax, sweetheart. Do you know what today is? Valentine's Day. Lovers aren't supposed to fight on this day.'

Babloo's face lit up at the sound of his father's voice, and without hesitation, he threw off the quilt and jumped out of bed, racing toward his mother to grab the phone. His mother made a mock annoyed face at her husband, but there was warmth in her eyes as she handed Babloo the phone.

'Pappa!' Babloo squealed, his excitement spilling through the small room.

Suresh grinned, flipping the phone's camera to show Babloo the long convoy stretching ahead of him. There were 78 vehicles winding through the rugged terrain. The atmosphere among the jawans was light-hearted, despite the long journey. Some were playing cards; others were glued to their phones, sending messages to loved ones; others were cracking jokes. Laughter echoed through the bus as someone threw out a witty remark, sparking new jokes from his comrades.

Babloo's eyes grew wide with curiosity. 'Pappa, show me your gun!'

Suresh, always the playful father, lifted his AK-56 rifle into view, the gleam of the weapon catching the light. Babloo clapped his hands in delight, bouncing on his toes with excitement. 'Pappa, you're the bravest and most powerful man on earth!'

The young boy's imagination was already running wild, and a new idea sparked in his mind. 'I'm going to paint a picture of you with your AK-47 and send it to you!' he declared, full of pride.

Suresh smiled at his son's enthusiasm but gently shook his head. 'Don't send it just yet, son. I'll be relocating to a new address soon. I'll visit home soon, and then I'll see your painting in person.'

The promise hung in the air, filling the small room with hope, as Babloo's mother watched her husband through the screen, her heart swelling with both love and worry.

In the cold, desolate landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, Shakir Bashir and his young accomplice, Adil Dar, stood side by side, eyes scanning the Bolero SUV in front of them. Inside, carefully stacked and hidden beneath innocuous cargo, were the explosives and detonators that would soon bring chaos to the highway. The preparations were complete; there was nothing left to check.

The weight of the moment hung heavy in the air. Bashir, with years of hardened resolve, looked at Adil, the younger man's face a mask of grim determination. Adil wasn't just a boy anymore; he was about to become a weapon in their larger cause. There was no turning back.

Bashir reached out, pulling Adil into a tight embrace. 'This is it, brother,' he whispered, his voice low but steady. 'May Allah be with you.'

Adil returned the embrace, his heart pounding, his mind a mix of steely resolve and resignation. He nodded silently, stepping back as Bashir's eyes bore into his. Bashir would not be going with him. This was Adil's journey to complete.

Without another word, Adil slid into the driver's seat, his fingers gripping the wheel with a new intensity. He started the engine, the low hum of the vehicle blending into the quiet of the rural road. Bashir stood motionless, watching as the Bolero rolled away, dust rising in its wake. He didn't move until the vehicle had disappeared from view.

Adil's hands tightened on the steering wheel as he drove down the narrow rural road leading to the highway. His breath came in steady, controlled bursts. He knew the pistol lay under his seat, a quiet reminder of the violence to come. With each passing second, the CRPF convoy drew closer. He knew the exact point where he would merge onto the highway, where his vehicle would blend into the rest of the traffic, just another SUV amidst the chaos of daily life.

As he neared the highway, his eyes flicked to the rear view mirror, and he leaned over to catch a glimpse of his own reflection. His

face was set in a grim mask, the determination etched deep into his features. There was no hesitation in his movements; only the cold, mechanical rhythm of a man who had accepted his fate.

The slip road appeared ahead. He merged onto the highway smoothly, his Bolero falling into line with the other vehicles. The convoy wasn't far now. In the distance, he could make out the dull gleam of the military trucks, the chatter of the soldiers likely filling the air inside. His heart beat faster, but his grip remained steady. Each second brought him closer to the inevitable.

The convoy loomed larger in his sights, and the weight of what he was about to do pressed down on him. But his resolve didn't falter. His mission was clear. The moment of reckoning had come.

At that very moment, Babloo's eyes were still glued to the phone screen, watching his father's face framed by the familiar background of the convoy. But suddenly, the screen flickered. In an instant, an orange flash filled the display, and then it turned black. The sound of muffled screams broke through the fading connection, leaving Babloo frozen, the phone slipping slightly in his hands.

'Mamma ...?' he whispered, trying to make sense of what he had just seen. His small fingers frantically tapped at the screen, trying to reconnect. But nothing happened. His father's voice, the cheerful chatter of the soldiers – it was all gone. The signal had disappeared into an eerie silence.

Back on the highway in Pulwama, the world had been transformed into chaos. A massive explosion ripped through the CRPF convoy with devastating force. Vehicles were tossed like toys into the air, crumpling and shattering as fire and smoke swallowed the road. Flames licked at the twisted metal, black smoke billowing towards the sky, a thick, choking cloud that darkened the morning sun.

Adil's mission had reached its horrific conclusion.

Amidst the wreckage, where once there had been camaraderie and laughter, now lay the aftermath of unimaginable destruction. Bodies littered the ground, some thrown from their vehicles, others still trapped in the mangled remains of the convoy. Shouts of anguish and disbelief filled the air, but they were drowned by the roar of fire and the sickening crackle of burning debris.

In the midst of the wreckage, Suresh's body hung from the window of a shattered bus, his life brutally cut short. His uniform, once a symbol of bravery, was now torn and bloodied, his upper body draped limply from the twisted frame. His hand, still clutching the phone he had used to speak to his son just moments before, dripped blood onto the ground below, an agonizing reminder of the conversation that had been cut off in the blink of an eye.

The warmth of his voice, the joy in Babloo's excited squeal, were silenced forever.



An hour later, the shockwaves of the Pulwama attack reverberated across India. In homes, offices and crowded streets, phones rang and notifications lit up. On screens large and small, a chilling video began to circulate, shared across social media platforms, forwarded from one group to another with growing disbelief. It was the final message of the suicide attacker, Adil Dar.

In the poorly lit frame of the video, a young man sat at the centre. His face was fair, his expression cold and resolute. A stubble covered his jaw, and his short hair cast shadows across his brow. He held an M4 carbine in his hands, its menacing form gleaming in the low light. On either side of him, a deadly arsenal was arranged: an AK-47 assault rifle on his left, a sniper rifle with a night sight scope on his right. Ten grenades lay at his feet, alongside an equal number of magazines. Behind him, a stark black banner of Jaish-e-Mohammed loomed, its bold script a haunting reminder of the terror group's reach.

Adil Dar began to speak, his voice steady and emotionless, carrying the weight of his deadly mission.

'My name is Adil,' he declared, staring into the camera with a chilling calmness. 'I joined Jaish-e-Mohammed a year ago. After a year's wait, I have finally been given the chance to do what I joined Jaish for.'

His words were a dagger to the heart of a nation in mourning. As he spoke, the reality of his actions began to sink in for those

watching. Families, students, workers and people from all walks of life listened in horror as he continued.

‘By the time this video reaches you, I’ll be in heaven,’ he said, his voice resolute. ‘This is my last message for the people of Kashmir ... Jaish has kept the flame alive and stayed put in adverse circumstances. Come, join the group and prepare for one last fight.’

The video ended abruptly, leaving a stunned silence in its wake. But the damage was done. Adil Dar’s message had spread like wildfire, igniting anger, fear and sorrow across the nation. His chilling words, delivered with such conviction, left a nation reeling in the aftermath of his horrific actions.

Across India, the Pulwama attack dominated every news channel, every social media feed and every conversation in homes and offices. The nation was gripped by shock, anger and grief. Televised debates flared as spokespersons of the ruling party vowed swift and stern action against those responsible, while Opposition leaders sharply criticized the government’s handling of security. The country, already reeling from the tragedy, now found itself facing not just a crisis of safety, but a crisis of leadership, laid bare before the cameras.

As twilight settled over New Delhi, casting the city in a slowly darkening crimson light, the military wing of Palam Airport became the solemn heart of the nation’s mourning. Forty-two coffins, draped in the Indian tricolour, were displayed in neat rows, each bearing the remains of the brave soldiers who had perished in the attack. The air was suffocating with sorrow and rage, a potent mix that mirrored the darkening sky above.

Under the weight of grief, the prime minister of India stood alongside the three military chiefs, the NSD, heads of security agencies and key members of his cabinet. His eyes, moist with unshed tears, betrayed the depth of his sorrow. Yet his jaw remained visibly clenched, a confirmation of the anger simmering beneath the surface.

The silence around him was palpable as he stepped forward to address the gathered assembly, his voice steady but laden with emotion.

'We must get to the bottom of the incident,' he declared, his tone firm despite the weight of grief. 'Leave no stone unturned and find out the perpetrators of this ghastly crime.'

A heavy silence followed his words, the weight of the loss pressing down on everyone present. The prime minister's gaze shifted to the NSD, standing just behind him, his expression unreadable but his presence commanding.

The NSD stepped forward, his voice low yet resolute. 'Let us fix the images of these forty-two coffins in our minds and keep them there until we've delivered a fitting response to the architects of this massacre.'

The words hung in the air, heavy with the promise of retribution. The solemnity of the moment was punctuated by the soft strains of the national anthem as it played in the background. The flags stood at half-mast, fluttering gently against the deepening crimson sky, a silent reminder of the blood that had been spilled.

As the ceremony drew to a close, the prime minister gave one final, lingering look at the rows of coffins before turning to leave. His heart heavy, his mind already focused on what had to come next. It would be an unyielding pursuit of justice, no matter the cost.

The prime minister's convoy sped through the streets of New Delhi, the flashing lights of security vehicles reflecting off the sleek, dark cars. Inside the PM's vehicle, the atmosphere was heavy with silence, the weight of the evening's events pressing down on everyone present.

At exactly 6.46 p.m., the prime minister's fingers hovered over his phone as he composed a message meant to unite a grieving nation. His mind replayed the images of the coffins, the tearful families, the shattered lives. His heart ached with sorrow, but beneath it all, a steely resolve began to take root.

With a final glance at the words, he tapped the screen, sending the message into the digital world: 'The attack on CRPF personnel in Pulwama is despicable. I strongly condemn this dastardly attack. The sacrifices of our brave security personnel shall not go in vain. The entire nation stands shoulder to shoulder with the families of the brave martyrs. May the injured recover quickly.'

As the message began to spread across social media, shared by millions in a matter of minutes, the prime minister turned his gaze out of the car window. The city lights blurred into streaks of white and yellow as they passed, a sharp contrast to the darkness that weighed heavily on his mind. His face, reflected faintly in the glass, was a mixture of determination and grief, mirroring the mood of a nation that mourned its fallen but demanded justice.

He knew this attack had struck at the heart of India, and there would be no going back. The weight of leadership bore down on him like never before. The decisions he made in the coming days would shape not only the country's response but its position on the global stage.

The blur of the city lights continued, but in the prime minister's mind, things were becoming painfully clear. The time for words would soon give way to action.

Next day, as the city of New Delhi settled into an uneasy quiet, the Prime Minister's Office was anything but calm. The lights inside the grand building remained bright, and the air was heavy with tension. The prime minister had convened an urgent meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security Affairs, and around the large conference table sat the most powerful figures in the government including ministers of defence, home, finance, foreign and legal affairs, along with the NSD.

The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on each face. The usual formality of such gatherings was overshadowed by a shared sense of determination. This was no ordinary crisis. The Pulwama attack had shaken the very foundations of the nation, and every individual in that room understood the gravity of what was at stake.

The NSD, standing at the head of the room, began his presentation with cold, clear efficiency. Reports from the preliminary examination of the blast site lay before him, and as he spoke, the entire room seemed to lean in, hanging on every word.

'It is clear,' the NSD began, his voice steady but laced with the seriousness of the moment, 'that the Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed is behind this heinous attack. While Pakistan is attempting to claim that the suicide bomber was a local Kashmiri,

the social media post we've recovered directly implicates JeM in this unforgivable crime.'

The ministers exchanged dark looks as the implications of this statement sank in. The NSD continued, unfazed by the tension.

'We are already in talks with our allies in the US and other western nations, asserting our right to self-defence against cross-border terrorism. Our intelligence is working tirelessly to trace the network that supported this attack, and we've made it clear that this cannot be tolerated.'

The prime minister, seated at the head of the table, nodded, his expression grim but resolute. 'Yes,' he said, his voice breaking the silence that followed. 'Both the US and the UK have already offered their full support to India in bringing the perpetrators and their backers to justice. They understand the gravity of this situation as well as we do.'

The room fell silent again, the weight of the prime minister's words settling over them. Every individual present knew this wasn't just about retaliation; it was about reshaping India's position on the global stage, reaffirming the country's stance on terrorism, and demonstrating that such an attack would not go unanswered.

The NSD glanced at the assembled ministers before continuing. 'Our forces are on high alert, and we are preparing for all possible scenarios. We have also initiated diplomatic channels to ensure the international community supports any actions we may need to take. But the final decision, of course, lies with this committee.'

The prime minister's gaze swept the room, taking in the hardened expressions of his cabinet. He could feel the shared determination, the understanding that this moment was pivotal as not only for the country's immediate response but for the future of its security and geopolitical standing.

'We must be clear in our intentions,' the prime minister said, his tone unwavering. 'The time for mere words is over. We will act.'

The room remained silent, but the resolve was palpable. This night would mark the beginning of India's journey toward justice, whatever it took.

In the stillness that followed the urgent meetings, the weight of the night's events hung heavily in the air. The bustling energy of the cabinet ministers had faded, and now only two figures remained in the conference room. They were the prime minister and the NSD. The large space, once filled with voices and urgency, now seemed eerily quiet. Both men, though exhausted, remained alert, their minds far too burdened to rest.

The prime minister stood by the window, gazing out at the darkened city beyond. The streetlights cast faint halos of light across the quiet streets, and for a moment, the world seemed peaceful in a stark contrast to the storm brewing in his mind. Behind him, the NSD, equally weary from the night's discussions, stood silently, a shared understanding passing between them. They both knew the gravity of the decisions that lay ahead.

In a voice much gentler than the one he had used during the meetings, the prime minister broke the silence. 'Go and have some rest,' he said, his tone calm but resolute. 'We have to start early tomorrow.'

The NSD, his face lined with the weariness of both the day's events and the burden of his role, shook his head slightly. 'You too need some rest,' he suggested, though he already knew what the prime minister's response would be.

The prime minister turned slightly, his expression soft but unyielding. 'I cannot sleep,' he said quietly. 'This is my time with myself. I need to think, to reflect on what lies ahead.' A faint smile crossed his lips. 'And 4.30 a.m. is my yoga time.'

The NSD couldn't help but smile slightly at the familiar discipline of the prime minister, but the smile quickly faded as the weight of the conversation returned. He cleared his throat, his voice steady but filled with the seriousness of the situation.

'You ordered a surgical strike across the Line of Control last September after Uri,' the NSD began, his tone measured but firm. 'We took 23 lives, and the action was meant to signal to the world that India would not shy away from punitive action.' He paused, the weight of his next words hanging in the air. 'Yet the neighbour didn't care. And now, we have Pulwama.'

The prime minister's eyes, still fixed on the city lights, darkened with understanding. The NSD's words echoed the unspoken truth they both had been grappling with.

'It's time for a bigger step,' the NSD continued, his voice low but charged with conviction. 'A more significant response. We've shown restraint, we've sent messages. But this time, the message must be unmistakable.'

The prime minister remained silent, his thoughts racing. He knew the NSD was right. Despite the surgical strike and the countless diplomatic overtures, Pakistan had continued its provocations, pushing India to the brink once again. Pulwama was a stark reminder that the stakes were higher than ever, and India's next move would need to reflect that reality.

The NSD straightened, sensing the prime minister's internal struggle but knowing he had to give him space to process it. He offered a small nod, a gesture of both respect and understanding. 'Good night, sir,' he said quietly before turning to leave.

As the NSD left the room, the prime minister stood alone, the city's quiet night unfolding before him. His mind churned with the weight of leadership, knowing that the decisions he made in the coming hours would not only define the immediate response but would shape India's future in the region.

In the quiet of his solitude, he braced himself for what was to come. The nation's resolve would soon be tested, and this time, there would be no turning back.



The streets of the capital lay draped in pre-dawn quiet, the city still holding its breath before the rush of a new day. The NSD's black SUV, accompanied only by a lone security vehicle, sliced through the stillness, the hum of the engine a faint intrusion on the tranquillity of the hour. The lights of the city blinked faintly in the distance, but for now, the world seemed paused, hovering on the edge of awakening.

As his convoy approached a traffic light, the NSD, seated in the back of the vehicle, gestured to his driver. 'Stop here,' he said,