

Just beyond reach

By Ashwin Sanghi

He died on his birthday—the twenty-ninth of July.

That evening Rajesh Chauhan had enjoyed his usual double-peg of Bunnahabhai accompanied by a few puffs of a Havana. He had then dropped in for a late night tryst with the latest in a long line of mistresses. Parked near the entrance foyer, his gleaming Bentley attracted the attention of passers-by while his chauffeur patiently waited for his master to emerge from the apartment.

Rajesh Chauhan was a Leo. Like all male lions, he was handsome and expected to be served.

Rajesh's rags-to-riches story was almost the stuff of fairy tales. Born to a blacksmith in Ludhiana, he had run away from home at age 10. Working as a paperboy, tea vendor, car washer and shoe polisher on Dalal Street, Mumbai's stockbroking district, he had managed to survive the rough and tumble of Maximum City. At night he would spread a few newspapers on the pavement near the tea stall and fall asleep, utterly exhausted. He did not know that his life was about to dramatically change.

One morning he had been polishing a customer's shoes when he overheard him discussing a particular company with his stockbroker. The information turned out to be nothing less than gold. There had been no looking back for Rajesh Chauhan.

Honoré de Balzac had always maintained that behind every great fortune lay a great crime. Rajesh's life story would have been the perfect example of Balzac's view.

Chairman of one of India's largest investment banks and private equity firms, Rajesh could make stock indices jump by simply snapping his fingers. Successive prime ministers routinely depended on him to fill party coffers, while pompous businessmen turned embarrassingly servile in his presence. There was almost nothing in the world that Rajesh could not possess. Except for Renuka.

His mind wandered to happier and simpler times. He remembered the feeling of Renuka's head on his shoulders, the excitement of waiting for her to show up at the movies, the tenderness of holding hands, the thrill of



Ashwin Sanghi

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sharing a cup of coffee and the intensity of their kisses. Why had he messed it up?

Rajesh sighed as he lay in bed next to the sleeping woman. One of India's finest fashion models, she was stunning—both in and out of clothes. For the chauvinistic Rajesh, she was simply the bedroom equivalent of his Bentley, Porsche or Lamborghini. The greater the curves, the more exciting and dangerous they were. The problem with Rajesh was that he tired rather easily and was about to ditch the Bentley. Looking at the pretty lady's face, he realised that it was time to ditch her too.

He mulled over the idea as he fell into an anxious slumber, far less restful than the pavement snooze. The room was dark, the lights having been thoughtfully dimmed by the woman. Her eyes were shut but she was not asleep.

She waited a few minutes before opening her eyes. She carefully ran a hand under her pillow to find what she was looking for. She felt the cold metal in her hands as she contemplated her next move.

She allowed her thoughts to drift back in time. She had been far too young to understand the implications of what Rajesh Chauhan had done. The full realisation had hit her many years later. Unfortunately, her elder sister, Renuka, had been the one who had borne the brunt of his misdeeds.

Their father—Omprakash Khanna—had spent his life building a reputable mining business and it had taken the vultures less than a week to destroy. A powerful cartel of stockbrokers from Kolkata had decided to short sell shares of the company. "Sell today at 380, I guarantee that you will be able to buy back the share tomorrow at 300," was the advice that had been passed around to large clients that first day. A young man shining an equity customer's shoes had picked up the tip too. A week later, the value of the share was down to ₹10 as the market went into overdrive liquidating the stock.

Unable to cope with the financial shock, Omprakash had chosen what he saw as his only route. He stood on the balcony of his tenth floor office at Nariman Point, smoked a cigarette and then began reciting verses from the *Hanuman Chaleesa*. Like Hanuman, he then leapt into the blue sky. Omprakash's body was discovered splattered on the roof of a car that lay parked on the street below. For his elder daughter he left a small note. It simply said, "Speak to Mr Dilip Desai for blood money".

Omprakash's daughters, Renuka and Reshma, had been left penniless. Renuka had been only 22 and Reshma was a mere 10-year-old. Renuka had taken charge. She had sold off whatever few assets they still owned. She then shifted along with Reshma to a small one-room flat in Fort. Even though she had completed her LLB, she accepted a secretarial job in a doctor's office. She blocked out all memories of her father and his suicide, flatly refusing to discuss the topic with anyone. It was

almost as though it had never happened.

A year later, she obtained an accountant's job in a Dalal Street brokerage. She switched, as the firm was located closer to home. It was a small outfit that had been established by a newcomer. His name was Rajesh Chauhan. She knew nothing about him except that he was a rising star on the exchange.

The relationship between Rajesh and Renuka had taken some time to develop. In fact, they barely spoke for the first few months. She had retreated into her shell and he remained focused on deal-making. One evening when she was waiting for the bus, he had pulled up his car beside her and offered to drop her home. He found her warm, honest, intelligent, caring and witty. Besides, she was gorgeous. She found him to be charming, determined, ambitious, ruthless and focused. In less than a month, Renuka had given up the job because it was impossible to carry on a relationship with the boss inside the office.

Rajesh discovered a small two-bedroom apartment on Marine Drive and Renuka and Reshma were quickly relocated there. Each evening, Rajesh would drop in after work and they would go for

a walk along the seafront. They would often go for movies to Regal. On weekends they would go for long drives to buy *chikki* from Lonavla. And then one day, Rajesh asked Renuka to marry him.

"There is nothing that I want more than you," he declared to her, seated on the concrete platform that ran along the length of Marine Drive. "And I want little Reshma to move in with us—to be our daughter." Renuka was deliriously happy and she kissed him with utter abandon.

That evening, the couple went out for a quiet dinner to an Italian restaurant and spoke for hours over a bottle of wine. It was almost as though they wanted to discover each other in ways that they had never bothered to. What did she want from life? What was his biggest fear? How would she cope with the responsibility of bringing up Reshma while having kids of her own? What was his biggest regret?

The last question turned out to be a deal breaker. Rajesh confided that he had made a tidy sum of money by shorting a stock. He had managed to get all his friends—shopkeepers, *baniyas*, food vendors and paperboys—to pool resources in order to take advantage of the hot tip. The net result had been a massive windfall for all of them. It had eventually led to establishing his own brokerage. Some months later he had heard that the owner of the company had jumped off his balcony because of financial ruin. It was his greatest regret in life. Making money off someone else's life had never been his intention.

Renuka turned white as she heard his story. The wine glass slipped from her hand. Rajesh assumed that she was unwell and quickly bundled ▶

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her into his car and drove her home. Not a word was exchanged for the rest of the evening. The next day when Rajesh telephoned, there was no answer. Repeated calls went unanswered. When he drove over to her house, the watchman told him that Renuka and Reshma had moved out of the house. They were not traceable.

That had been 11 years ago and Reshma was now 21. The ravishing Reshma now looked at the man sleeping next to her as she gripped the knife in her hand tightly with a kerchief. She had never revealed to Rajesh that she was the delicate little girl who had once viewed him as a father figure. She had changed her name and identity. She had whored herself to him with a specific purpose. Not in his wildest dreams would Rajesh have imagined that the drop-dead gorgeous model sleeping on his bed was the kid sister of Renuka. Reshma smiled. It was now time to set in motion the next part of her plan.

The knife was a razor-sharp Yoshihiro, ideally suited for crafting delicate sushi. It was also deadly enough to slit a throat. She hesitated for a moment before placing the handle in the dozing man's hand and forcing his fingers around it.

Rajesh woke up with a start to find himself holding a bloody knife while blood spurted from his lover's belly, her blood having drenched the bedsheets. Panic stricken, he let go of the knife and desperately attempted to make sense of what had happened. Was he in the midst of a nightmare?

Before he could react, there was loud knocking on the bedroom door. "Police! Open this door immediately," Rajesh did not move from the bed. It was almost as though he were paralysed. A few seconds later the bedroom door came crashing down as a group of khaki-clad cops barged in. Rajesh protested that he was innocent, but he knew that no one would believe him given the bloody knife in his hand. He was cuffed and driven away into judicial custody.

Rajesh was presented before the chief judicial magistrate a few hours later that morning. His lawyer, a white-haired gentleman wearing an expensive Brioni suit, was rather confident that matters would go his way. The lawyer had discreetly informed Rajesh that an intermediary had spoken with the magistrate and that a deal had been negotiated.

"How do you plead?" asked the magistrate.

"Not guilty, your honour," said Brioni smoothly. "My client is an upstanding member of the community and we ask that he be granted bail."

Rajesh was tired, disoriented and disheveled. He ignored his lawyer and kept his head bent down, his eyes firmly glued to the floor.

"The girl that he was sleeping with... Mr Rajesh Chauhan shall sign share transfer forms assigning 51 per cent of his business interest to her. In return,

he shall be a free man," the intermediary had apparently told the lawyer.

"But that's ridiculous!" sputtered Rajesh when told of the offer by the lawyer. "I'm not giving away my business to a stranger."

"You saw the blood on the bed. My sources tell me that she will not survive. The share transfer will be invalid without her signatures," explained the lawyer to Rajesh, winking. "It's a sweet deal for you. The shares cannot be transferred and hence will continue to vest with you. The magistrate wants nothing. Only your repentance—symbolic almost."

Rajesh jumped at it. It was a free lunch! In less than an hour the lawyer had obtained his client's signatures on the share transfer forms.

"Given that Mr Chauhan does not have a prior criminal record and he has cooperated with the police, I do not see a problem in granting bail. The accused shall surrender his passport to the police and shall keep himself available for questioning at all times by the police," said the magistrate.

Rajesh exhaled. It was a sigh of relief. He looked at the magistrate. He gasped. She was older, but just as beautiful as she had been 11 years ago. Renuka looked at him without registering the slightest trace of recognition on her face.



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"I am also happy to announce the police have positive news from the hospital," said the magistrate. "The young lady was rushed from the scene of the crime to the hospital. She has now been discharged."

Rajesh was confused. At first he was happy that she had made a speedy recovery. His face then registered confusion. How had she been discharged so quickly after a stabbing? He digested the news, continuing to stare at Renuka's face. He turned to look at his lawyer. "Those shares," he hissed. "I transferred them because you told me that she was on the verge of death!"

"The shares were blood money," said the lawyer casually. "The shares now belong to her. Apparently the blood in question was that of her father, but the blood on the bed was from a blood bank!"

The lawyer handed over a small envelope to Rajesh. With that, Mr Dilip Desai, the highly paid lawyer snapped shut his briefcase and stood up, smiled at his client, and walked away.

Rajesh opened the envelope and looked inside. It contained a small booklet. Pulling it out he looked at it closely.

It was a copy of the *Hanuman Chaleesa*.

Rajesh was no fool. He knew when women wanted so much money from him, it meant only one thing. They were going to escape.

Story continued by Manish Gaekwad

She retracted her hand. The metal in her palm—a Sheaffer biro pen. Rajesh had placed it under her pillow while caressing her face.

She slipped out of the room. She switched on her cellphone and called her fiancé. "We've got him this time," she whispered.

Arun heard her out. He preferred not to speak. She had to get out of the danger zone first. "Hurry, don't talk. Just get here fast," he guided her. Arun rarely used English to speak to her. It was a foreign language for him. He only used it in an emergency. It was his way of cutting ties. Renuka spoke eloquently; her English was one of the tools of her trade. She used it to maximum effect to mesmerise men like Rajesh. She was aware of his background, a man who found an intelligent, English speaking woman a high value stock to invest in. She could be used to curry favours with international investors. Sometimes, it helped him to show off to ministers and bureaucrats vying for a supermodel's attention, which he so easily had and could flaunt at his disposal.

Renuka walked into the apartment lobby and asked the driver to be fetched. The chauffeur promptly appeared with the Bentley. As he opened the door for her, she said, "*Sahab* is sleeping; drop me at Land's End." The driver nodded and got in. She slumped in the back seat. She opened her bag to look at the cheque one more time. It had Rajesh's signature. She said she needed it as down payment for a duplex apartment. She wanted her own place; in ocean blues and foam whites. The pictures she had shown him of the new high-rise overlooking the sea. On the eighteenth floor. They could make love on the balcony. No one to disturb the love birds.

Rajesh was no fool. He had parted with the cheque. No amount on it. Not yet. Rajesh woke up as soon as Renuka bolted the door. He knew her game. It was time to call her bluff. He knew when women wanted so much money from him, it meant only one thing. They were going to escape. Shilpa, Tanya, Roma—so many had tried to get away. He knew why they slept with him. It was not for his body. Money. The money he slaved over. The money that bayed for his blood and sweat. It demanded sacrifice.

Rajesh turned the bedside lamp on. He picked up his phone and called his driver, Yadav.

"*Kahan ho?*"

Yadav said he was driving madam. Rajesh asked where they had reached. "*Bas sir, Sealink pahunchne hi waale hai,*" Yadav relayed.

What's madam doing? Rajesh wanted to know. She's talking to someone on the phone, ►