

BOOK EXCERPT

Murder, mystery and mythology: Why Ashwin Sanghi's novels are blockbuster material for the screen

An excerpt from 'The Krishna Key', which is being adapted for a movie and web series, and from the thriller-writer's latest novel 'Keepers Of The Kalachakra'.

by *Ashwin Sanghi*

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The Krishna Key

Ravi Mohan Saini climbed up the short ladder on the starboard side of Bhojaraj's research vessel, *R/V Radha*. Priya, who had climbed up first, offered her hand in mock chivalrous fashion to assist him. He gallantly declined.

The young Tamil assistant of Dr Nikhil Bhojaraj was still in the launch. "Please proceed down the corridor to Dr Bhojaraj's lab. He's expecting you. I'll just settle the launch owner's bill and be right with you," he shouted above the din of the boat's outboard motor. Saini nodded his assent and walked towards the laboratory, with Priya a couple of steps behind him. Luckily, direction signs marked all significant areas of the vessel. *Radha* had been built by Hyundai Heavy Industries – the

largest shipbuilding yard in the world and the direction signs were typical of Korean attention to detail.

“Isn’t it strange that there seems to be no one managing the boat?” asked Saini. “I would have imagined that this vessel would have been buzzing with activity given that it is the focal point of Bhojaraj’s undersea exploration.”

“It’s possible that they’re in a team meeting of some kind,” ventured Priya, as they reached the door to Bhojaraj’s laboratory. Saini paused outside the door and knocked. It seemed the polite thing to do before entering someone’s workspace.

There was no answer. Saini looked at Priya quizzically and knocked once more. When there was only silence, Saini caught hold of the door handle, pulled it downwards and swung open the door easily. The sight that greeted him made him want to jump off the boat and into the deep blue waters without a life jacket. He would have done so, had he known that the Tamil assistant was busy informing the authorities of a murder on board *Radha*.

“God almighty!” muttered Saini as he attempted to overcome his fear and revulsion. He tiptoed gingerly to the far wall on which a Sanskrit shloka had been written in blood. Just underneath the shloka lay the slumped body of Dr Nikhil Bhojaraj, his legs at right angles to his torso, surrounded by a pool of blood that had begun to coagulate. Stabbed into the sole of his left foot was a scalpel that bore the initials “RM”. On his forehead was the rubber-stamp imprint of a lotus flower. Almost identical in every respect to the murder scene photograph shown by Inspector Radhika Singh to him in Jaipur. No, but the emblem on Varshney’s forehead had been a wheel-like symbol, whereas this one was the image of a lotus.

“Do you know how to check a pulse?” asked Saini.

“I don’t know how to do it on the neck,” said Priya. “I can only check for it on his wrist. You will need to cut the duct tape away.”

Noticing a pair of specimen scissors on one of the lab counters, Saini grabbed it and quickly cut through the layers of tape, leaving yet more of his ngerprints by way of vital evidence for the police.

Priya knelt and took Bhojaraj’s arm. She felt around his wrist until she found a vein just underneath his thumb. After a minute, she looked up at Saini who was standing over her and shook her head. “No pulse. He’s gone. Let me call someone for help,” said Priya, standing up and walking out of the laboratory.

“Anyone home?” she shouted within earshot of Saini. There was no response. The only sound was the steady hum of the power generator and the gentle lapping of waves against the hull of *Radha*. She tried the door to the utility room but it was jammed shut. She tried another door but it led to a storage closet. The next door led her to the common room where she immediately noticed seven members of Bhojaraj’s team lying comatose in assorted positions – some seated on their chairs and a

few having fallen to the ground. One of them had fallen asleep while eating his breakfast and the right side of his face lay in a plate of scrambled eggs.

She returned to Saini who seemed to be absorbed by the shloka on the wall. “Do you have your mobile phone with you? I need to take a few pics,” he said.

“What? We need to get out of here. You’ve been set up! Bhojaraj’s entire team has been sedated. If the police get here, they’re bound to pin this on you!” she said.

“Do you have your mobile phone or not?” repeated Saini impatiently, continuing to stare at the shloka that had been written in blood on the wall. Priya wordlessly reached into the pocket of her Levis, pulled out her Samsung Galaxy Xcover and handed it over to Saini who had acquired an almost robotic demeanour. He pointed the phone at the wall and took a few photographs of the shloka and returned the phone to her.

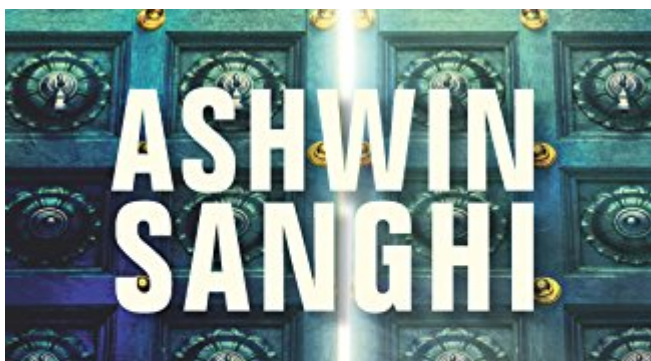
“Are you done playing detective?” she asked acridly. “I don’t think you understand the seriousness of the situation you’re in. Bhojaraj has been killed in exactly the same manner as Varshney was. In both instances, you were at the scene of the crime. None of the crew was awake, so there’s no one to vouch for the fact that you reached here *after* he was killed. Even the assistant who brought us here on the schooner has disappeared, so we have no way of getting to shore except by manoeuvring this massive ship towards the coast, which seems impossible, given our limited expertise.”

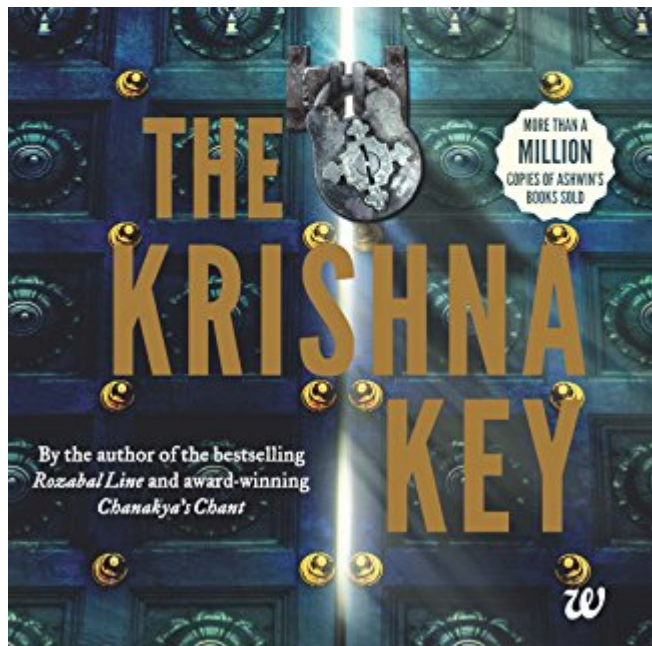
Saini seemed oblivious to her comments. He was staring at a silver bracelet that lay on the floor. Bending down to examine it more closely he noticed that it bore someone’s name. He screwed up his eyes to discern each letter. *Taarak Vakil. Could it be the killer’s name?*

Saini seemed lost in thought. He carefully picked up the bracelet and placed it in his trouser pocket. Looking like he was engaged in Zen meditation, he began scanning the maps that had apparently been the object of Bhojaraj’s attention earlier. “Incredible! Hindu scriptures talk of the universe consisting of the *saptadweep* – seven islands – but all seven islands were right here in Dwarka itself...Dwarka was the world! This is pathbreaking research!” he exclaimed. He paused for a moment before he spoke again. “Could you email yourself those photos I just took?” he asked Priya.

“Sure. The data network seems to be working fine,” she replied. She quickly attached and emailed the photos to her personal account. “Why?” she asked, putting the phone away.

“Because the phone may be unusable once we jump into the sea,” said Saini.





Keepers Of The Kalachakra

It was meant to be a happy time. A time when years of hard work were bearing fruit. Then why was Vijay feeling so burdened?

If he took the job at Milesian, he would accelerate his race to financial freedom, but it would mean dealing with spooky Schmidt. If he married Sujatha, he would get the only girl he had ever cared for, but it would mean all the attendant responsibilities of married life. It seemed like a lose-lose situation.

Lost in thought, Vijay got off the Delhi Metro at Lajpat Nagar station and headed towards the address of the lawyer. The name had been given to Vijay by his mentor at IIT. The lawyer specialised in immigration law. *I can't believe that I'm seriously considering the possibility of leaving India*, thought Vijay. *That I'm contemplating the idea of giving up Sujatha and an incredible job offer. For what? To simply run away from the difficult decisions that plague me?*

He walked briskly towards Central Market. He did not notice the two men who had got on the metro along with him and had left the train the moment that he jumped off. They had been maintaining a respectable distance from him but were now closing the gap. Vijay was oblivious to them, lost in thought. He turned left into a deserted alleyway that would shorten his route. And that's when it happened.

A hand was firmly clamped over his mouth, while another pair of hands lifted him up. He struggled to free himself from the grasp of his abductors, but it was of no use. The men were far more powerful than he was. He was blindfolded and quickly bundled into a van of some sort.

Vijay was forced into the middle of the rear bench seat, sandwiched between two men so that he would be unable to open either of the doors. Vijay attempted to discern how many people were in the vehicle. Four, going by the voices. They were discussing something in Marathi, a language Vijay could not understand. *Mumbai mafia?*

"Who are you?" asked Vijay, his voice quavering.

There was no reply.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Vijay, a little more forcefully. He was attempting to come across as confident even though he was scared nearly witless.

Again, there was only silence. Over the sound of traffic and honking, absolutely nothing was said.

Vijay opened his eyes as soon as the blindfold was removed. He squinted as the light of the overhead bulbs hit him. Where was he?

It had seemed like over two hours in the car. They had only stopped once when he had complained that he needed to empty his bladder. They had halted along what had seemed to him an isolated

stretch of road to enable him to relieve himself, but the blindfold had stayed intact and his abductors had remained companionably by his side.

After what seemed like an eternity, the car had come to a halt. The men had guided Vijay out and into a building, untying his blindfold as soon as he was seated.

He saw the backs of his abductors as they left him alone. One of them was wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with “Mumbai Indians” on the back.

Vijay looked about him. It seemed as though he was inside a giant abandoned warehouse. Above him were ominously high ceilings criss-crossed by rafters of rusting metal. It was a massive industrial space, the hard concrete floor on all sides of his chair seeming to stretch into infinity, meeting up with exposed brick walls containing vast but boarded-up windows. Huge ducts and exposed pipes ran overhead, enhancing the eeriness of his surroundings. Several naked bulbs hung on wires from an ancient beam overhead. The only furniture comprised a table and several chairs scattered around it.

He heard footsteps. Four people walked in. They sat down on chairs placed opposite his.

“Our apologies for bringing you here like this,” said the lone woman. “It was done for your own safety.”

Vijay’s brain was in overdrive. Who was this woman? Her accent told him she was American. He looked at the three others, all men. A Caucasian man, a South Asian and a Chinese. *Where the fuck am I?* thought Vijay desperately. *And who are these goddamned people?*

“I’m Judith Frost,” said the lady. “The others here are my colleagues: Yuri Petrov, Rakesh Sharma and Jin Zhang.”

“Who are you? Why have you brought me here?” asked Vijay, becoming a tad bolder.

“We represent a group of intelligence operatives from around the world,” replied Judith. “We are called the IG4. I am on deputation from the CIA, Petrov is from the Russian SVR, Sharma is from your country’s RAW and Zhang represents the Chinese MSS.”

Fine, but why am I here? Is this a case of mistaken identity?

One of Vijay’s abductors, the one wearing the Mumbai Indians t-shirt, walked in with a tray. It contained bottles of water, mugs of tea and biscuits.

“You must be parched,” said Judith, as the man placed a bottle and a mug of tea in front of him. Vijay opened the bottle gratefully and took big gulps. Then he had a few sips of the tea. It felt good.

He cleared his throat. “Why am I here? I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” he began.

“Your name is Vijay Sundaram. You are a PhD scholar at IIT Delhi. You have just completed your thesis and are interviewing for a position at Milesian Labs. You have also interviewed at other companies including Google and SpaceX. You have a girlfriend called Sujatha Iyer. You were brought up at an orphanage in Sringeri, Karnataka.” Judith stopped. “Do we have the right person?”

“Y-yes,” stammered Vijay, “but what do you want from me?”

“We want you to accept the job that Milesian Labs has offered you.”

By the bestselling author of *The Rozabal Line*,
Chanakya's Chant, *The Krishna Key* and *The Sialkot Saga*



ASHWIN SANGHI



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KEEPERS OF THE KALACHAKRA

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