

A cobra's bite doesn't hurt

Anil Nijhawan

Chapter 1

Your Highness Mr Narendra Modi,

You are the Prime Minister of India, one of the largest democracies of the world. They say you know many famous people, like Xi Jinping, Obama, Putin, Merkel and Trump. They invite you to their countries and welcome you like a VIP. When they come to India, you wear your best suit stitched by tailors in London and go to the airport to greet them with garlands of flowers. I have heard you even gift them beautiful marble replicas of our Taj Mahal. Once, I saw you in a big black car rushing to Kolkata airport for one such visit. I ran forward between two policemen and waved to you. However, did you wave

back? No. Another time I saw you on NDTV 9 o'clock news. You were giving a speech to thousands of people assembled at the *Maidan*. They were listening to you as if it were the most important thing in their lives. I was very impressed. However, my friend Sanju was not. He said it was all a political *tamasha* organised with a rent-a-crowd audience. Promise these people a hundred rupees and a cup of chai, and they will go anywhere, do anything for you. For two hundred rupees, they will even start a riot.

You said many things that day which did not interest me. However, when you started talking about children, I asked Sanju to turn up the volume. You were saying every child in India is like your own son or daughter; you will give them the education they deserve and help them achieve their ambitions in life. You went on to say children were the future of the country; no child should live in poverty, fear or ignorance.

That is when I said to myself, Kalu you must write to Mr Modi, tell him all about yourself. If anyone knows about living in poverty, fear, and ignorance, it is I. With due respects sir, however good your intentions, you will not succeed in this noble venture unless you look deeper into why there are so many abandoned children in this country. Do you know what happens to them? I can tell you. Many end up living on pavements, at railway stations, or in bus shelters. The lucky ones end up in orphanages, like the one I was in, until some gangsters kidnapped me at the age of fourteen.

I will tell you absolutely everything about me, including how often I go to the toilet and when. I hope you are not of a delicate nature, sir, not easily offended by violence and bad language. That is because I am going to be brutally honest. Like you, I am a man who likes to speak his mind.

When I said I would write to you, I did not mean literally. That is because I cannot write, though I can read a little. I am going to dictate everything to a Sanyo voice-recording machine. About twenty years old, made in Japan, it still works like a dream. My friend Sanju has promised to type the story on his HP 250 laptop.

Sanju went to school in Dhule village, studied up to class VI. He said he had to leave school when his father died of *bhang* overdose. Then the mother kicked him out, saying she did not want a man in the house anymore. She said she had had enough of men; they are all lazy fuckers. She did not use that word exactly, but something similar in Marathi. You will never catch me using bad language. Well, almost never. Once I did. That is because someone had made me very angry and sad. Let me tell you about that.

At the time, I was in Bangalore. I had a steady job working as a pickpocket. Now, Mr Modi, please do not be mad with me. I had to do what a man has to do to survive. I had no choice in the matter. If you meet Babu Bajrang and Father Petre, you will understand. Big, powerful gangsters they are. You may be interested to learn that they are also your *bhakts*, devotees. They said they have a big reach in the BJP party and that nobody can touch them. It

may be true because once I saw them send a bundle of thousand-rupee notes to a very important man in the government, whose name I have forgotten now. However, I have seen him on television a few times, a small man with greasy hair and a saffron tilak on his forehead, bowing and doing namaste to the camera like a very moral, saintly human being.

So, when they offered me the job of *phoketmar* how could I refuse? I was not alone, though. There were four of us on the team: Ramesh, Gokul, Bhushan, and me. My name is Kalu, though I am also called Kalu Cobra. Why Cobra? You will find out later. Ramesh was my best friend. I loved him like a brother. One night he went missing from the house. It was a surprise because no one had heard him leave. We assumed he had left early to work the crowd that had gathered in Cubborn Park for Guru Ramdev's *darshan* and to learn yoga from him. In the evening back home, we found Babu sitting on the white leather sofa, drinking Black Label. However, Ramesh was not there. That is when I began feeling uneasy, as if something bad had happened to him. I just could not shake off the fear that he may have come to some harm. Have you ever faced this kind of dilemma, sir?

'Ramesh has run away. We have looked for him everywhere. He can't be found,' Babu said just like that, casually, as if announcing tomorrow we are going to eat mutton biryani for dinner.

My heart stopped. I knew Ramesh so well. He never went anywhere without first telling me. If he were unhappy and wanted to leave Bangalore, I definitely would have known.

I said to Babu, ‘boss no way he would have run away. Something bad must have happened to him.’ Ramesh’s favourite song, *oye Raju pyar na kariya kariyo - dil toot jata hai*, began ringing in my ears. He often sang it to me, replacing Raju with Kalu.

However, Babu was adamant Ramesh had gone of his own free will. ‘Forget about that double-crossing *sarak ka kuta*,’ he said. Calling my brother a dirty wild dog was out of order. That is when I swore at Babu, sir. I called him *bahnchoot*, sister-fucker. Luckily, he did not hear me, or I would not be here dictating this letter to you.