

“Every neighboring state is an enemy and
the enemy’s enemy is a friend.”

—KAUTILYA, *THE ARTHASHASTRA*

CHAPTER 1

GALWAN VALLEY WESTERN HIMALAYAS

The battle had been barbaric. Forbidden from using firearms in the disputed border region, the Chinese soldiers had crept across the “Line of Actual Control” in the middle of the night armed with iron clubs studded with spikes, and bats wrapped with barbed wire. The brutal, medieval-style hand-to-hand combat had lasted for over six hours.

In the early light of dawn, a bitterly cold wind—like the breath of death itself—blew down the steep valley from the glaciers above. Bodies lay everywhere. The jagged stones along the banks of the chalky blue Galwan River were covered in blood.

Despite China’s gruesome surprise attack, the Ladakh Scouts had courageously charged into the fight. Known as the “Snow Warriors,” they were one of the Indian Army’s toughest, most fearsome, and most decorated regiments. They had only one mandate—to guard against the Chinese invading India via this section of the Himalayas.

The Snow Warriors had succeeded in their mission, but their success had come at a devastating cost. Twenty Indian soldiers had been killed and almost twice as many Chinese. Amid escalating tension between the

two nations, it had been one of their deadliest altercations yet. And once more, China had been the aggressor. The reason for the aggression, at least to those paying attention, was obvious.

Dramatically unpopular among its people and facing a myriad of social and economic problems, the Chinese Communist Party was weaker than it had ever been.

The CCP's grip on power was more tenuous than it had been in decades. The panic of its members was palpable. Many in the party believed they were only one Tiananmen Square away from full-blown revolution. It was why they had crushed the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and why they continued to flex their military muscle over Taiwan. One more crack in their hull; one more leak in their sagging, water-logged boat, and the CCP would slip beneath the surface of the waves and be dragged violently down to death.

To prop up the party and prevent such a demise, Beijing needed to fog the minds of its people—to convince them that they were locked in an existential struggle, that the world was out to destroy China.

The course of action they decided to adopt was a form of virulent nationalism—the likes of which hadn't been seen since the Italian fascism and German national socialism of the 1930s.

For their plan to take root and grow, Beijing needed bogeymen—both big and small, near and far. The United States and its western allies were a natural fit. Another, exceptional contender, however, lay right at China's doorstep. *India*.

As the world's largest Democracy, not only were India's ideas a threat, but so too were its growing economy, increasing military, and deepening ties with the United States. The CCP feared India's burgeoning power and was willing to do whatever necessary to diminish it.

Coercive statecraft to drive wedges between India and its neighbors, bloody cross border raids to capture and hold disputed territory, China was feeling weak and that weakness made them dangerous. Anything and everything was on the table—including the most contemptible and horrific acts of aggression.

The Snow Warriors' commander, Major Shaukat Banu, was a tall, sinewy man with a thick mustache. As he surveyed the carnage, his skin was still inflamed and sensitive to the touch. The weapon the Chinese had unleashed was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

At the end of the battle, when it had become obvious that they were going to lose, the Chinese had called their soldiers into retreat, and had activated some sort of directed energy device.

The weapon had heated up the water molecules beneath the Indian soldiers' skin, causing them to vomit and experience excruciating pain. The Ladakh Scouts had been left with no choice but to abandon any pursuit of the Chinese and to pull back out of the range of the weapon.

With their retreat secure, the Chinese had fled, leaving their comrades to the mercy of the Indian Army. Banu directed two of his medical officers to attend to any of the enemy in need of care. Despite the brutality shown by the Chinese, it was the honorable thing to do and, at his core, Major Shaukat Banu was first and foremost an honorable man.

Both in his training from the Indian Army, and as a guest of the United States military, he had been schooled in battlefield tactics and ethics.

The Snow Warriors had cross-trained with some of the United States' best high-altitude, cold weather experts including the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division, the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, and the Naval Special Warfare Cold Weather Detachment.

Those men, like Banu, who had proven themselves exceptionally distinguished, had been invited to further participate in special hand-to-hand training normally available only to America's most elite operators. The major credited the edged weapons portion of the program for the reason he was not only still standing, but also for why he had been able to slay so many Chinese.

On the left side of the belt encircling his blood-stained uniform, hung an American-made tomahawk popular with the U.S. Navy SEALs. On the right hung a custom, hand-forged knife carried by many of America's Delta Force operatives. Banu had been taught how to wield both, simultaneously—how to cut, and thrust, and strike his way through the enemy, which was exactly what he had done.

Eleven of the Chinese casualties had been at his hands. But as proficient as his skills had proven to be, they hadn't been enough to prevent the slaughter and injury of so many of his own men. Never had he so heavily felt the burden of command.

But, beneath his sense of loss, lay something else—a deep sense of foreboding. China had raised the stakes dramatically. It was probing; testing what worked and just how much India would absorb. Once the Chinese had their answer, they would strike again.

And like the cold wind that blew through the valley, the next attack would be more chilling, more deadly than anything that had come before.

Major Shaukat Banu's only question was whether India would be able to stop it.

CHAPTER 2

RAJASTHAN, INDIA
FOUR MONTHS LATER

A pistol, much less one with a suppressor, was not a common sight on the streets of Jaipur—especially not during Diwali, the Hindu festival of light.

As the largest celebration in India, Diwali represented the triumph of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair. Tonight, however, victory was about to be handed to evil, ignorance and despair all wrapped up in one.

American Eli Ritter had been encouraged to accept a security detail. Nothing too obvious, just something light, a buffer in case anything bad happened. He had declined.

Understanding his reluctance, the President's National Security Advisor had suggested pairing him with an Athena Team operative from the U.S. Army's all-female Delta Force unit. Once again, Ritter had declined. And with good reason.

Per his orders, he was supposed to be operating not just "under" the radar, but altogether off it. No one was to have any idea what he was up to. That was why he was in Jaipur and not in New Delhi, and why he had been in Adelaide and Osaka rather than Canberra and Tokyo.

Popping up in the capitals of India, Australia, and Japan—drawing attention to himself with bodyguards—could have jeopardized everything.

The President and his team, however, didn't like their shadow diplomat operating without protection. Reluctantly, after much debate, they had acquiesced. Ritter, after all, was a man who knew how to handle himself.

After leaving the United States Marine Corps, he had gotten a master's degree in economics and had joined the State Department. Over the years, he had been posted at various diplomatic missions around the world as an "economic development officer."

Officially, his job had been to help hammer out trade agreements and secure favorable environments for American corporations looking to operate abroad.

Unofficially, he had functioned as a highly regarded intelligence officer, skilled at recruiting foreign spies and building outstanding human networks.

Ritter had been so successful, that his identity had been kept secret from all but a very select few in the U.S. Government. Even after he had retired and moved into the private sector as an international business consultant, his identity had been protected.

While no one in the diplomatic arena was ever completely beyond suspicion of espionage, Ritter had come pretty damn close. None of his assets had ever been compromised and none of his colleagues had ever slipped up and revealed his true occupation. By all appearances, he had led a rather unremarkable career at the State Department, which was fine by him—just the way a true and professional spy would have wanted himself to be seen.

After opening his consulting business, Ritter had kept his nose clean. Any time someone from his past had come around with an intelligence contract, he had politely

refused. The espionage chapter of his life was closed. Or so he had thought.

Everything had changed when he showed up for a “new client” meeting and had found himself face-to-face with the President of the United States.

When the President explained the nature of the mission and what hung in the balance, Ritter had agreed to come out of retirement.

Other than his Marine Corps commitment to a lifetime of fitness, there was nothing about Ritter that said “military.” He was in his early sixties and stood about six-foot-two. With medium-length grey hair swept behind his ears, trademark stubble on his face, casual, yet well-tailored designer clothes, a TUDOR Black Bay Chrono, and a pair of Ray-Ban Aviators, he had looked like any other well-heeled tourist or stylish entrepreneur exploring India’s tenth largest metropolis.

In an effort to cement his relaxed, visitor image, as well as to pick up any potential surveillance, he had spent two days “sightseeing” and purchasing small gifts for his family back home.

The exquisite Pink City—so named for the pink blush of many of its buildings—had much to offer.

He took in the big sights like the stunning City Palace, the Jal Mahal, and the Hawa Mahal, as well as the impressive Amber Fort, the Nahargarh Fort, and the Galta Ji. At random, he wove in and out of countless lush gardens, in addition to bustling, colorful marketplaces selling everything from spices, textiles, and shoes, to perfume, jewelry, and crafts.

He used taxis, buses, and the colorful, open-air auto-rickshaws to get around. The air was scented with incense mixed with the winds that blew from the Thar Desert. He drank chai from sidewalk tea shops and ate food from street vendors—always keeping his eyes and ears open.

Never once did he notice, or sense, anyone following him. When it came time for his meeting, he felt confident that he was in the clear.

Even so, he continued to maintain his situational awareness. Leaving his hotel, he ran a series of surveillance detection routes through Jaipur's affluent Vaishali Nagar neighborhood.

The Diwali festival was in full swing and even more spectacular at night. From courtyards and rooftops, fireworks were being launched high into the night sky. Beautifully decorated homes were framed by the illumination from tiny, flickering, clay oil lamps.

People walked down the street waving sparklers, dressed in their most elegant clothing. Bursts of firecrackers could be heard coming from all directions. There were musicians on every corner. The traffic was thick and noisy. Everything in Jaipur was electric . . . thrumming . . . alive.

Ritter was meeting his contact in a part of Vaishali Nagar popular for its food scene. The Tansukh fine dining restaurant, with its gleaming white floors and polished wooden ceilings, specialized in authentic Rajasthani cuisine. It was one of his contact's favorites. Though they had serious business to discuss, the man had assured him that he was in for a meal he would never forget.

His contact had been right. From the Mohan Maas—meat stuffed with dried fruit and cooked slowly in milk, cardamom, and cinnamon—to the Bajra Roti flatbread, a never-ending parade of chutneys, and ice-cold bottles of Kingfisher beer from Bangalore, it had been an outstanding dinner.

Even better than the food, was his counterpart's agreement on almost everything he had come to discuss.

It wasn't a total fait accompli, however. Ritter would

have to convince the man's boss. And he would not be easy.

What's more, setting up the meeting was going to be extremely difficult and would require an unparalleled level of secrecy. India was on edge.

China had become much more belligerent. Pakistan, despite its massive internal problems, was also stirring up trouble. And the Kashmir region, after an unusually protracted calm, was beginning to overheat.

Those elements alone had the makings of a perfect storm. Throw in an upcoming election, and the danger level only skyrocketed. Politicians seldom liked taking risks. They liked risk-taking even less when their political career hung in the balance.

Complicating matters even further was the fact that India's democracy was backsliding. Illiberal forces were amassing power at an alarming rate. The incumbent party was doing all it could to hang on to office. There were fears that a state of emergency might be declared, the constitution suspended, and all elections postponed.

It was against this difficult backdrop that Eli Ritter had been sent to work his quiet magic. And based on the success of his dinner, he appeared—so far—to be off to a solid start.

So that they would not be seen leaving together, his contact stayed behind and ordered a digestif.

Stepping outside, Ritter smiled. Jaipur's citizens were still out in force celebrating. He also felt like doing a little celebrating.

Removing one of the *Cohibas* he had purchased earlier in the day, he snipped the end, and fired it up.

The communists may have fucked up everything else in Cuba, he mused, but they'd been wise enough to keep their hands off Cuba's exceptional cigar industry.

Filling his mouth with a heady draw of peppery tobacco smoke, he struck off toward his hotel.

Two blocks later, a string of firecrackers exploded close by, taking him by surprise.

Out of instinct, he turned toward the noise. That was when the assassin stepped up from the opposite direction, placed the suppressed pistol behind Ritter's left ear, and pressed the trigger.