

building. "How droll it would be if we were to push our MD into this mess," mused aloud Zaman. "That's a top-notch suggestion," Shawkat added immediately.

Anzam says, "But why push in the M.D.? We could beseech him, O honourable sir, please join them downstairs..."

Mid-sentence, someone shrieked in an excited voice, "Oh look there, there... one of them has been caught."

True enough, one had indeed been caught. Who knows what was going on behind the scenes but what could be seen up front was a boy running with a few others at his heels. He couldn't make it very far, and his pursuers overpowered him. One raised a hand holding a long-ish knife in it. The sun glinted menacingly on the blade. Over here on the roof, those who had assembled waited in anticipation. It was then that Anzam began to feel the tremor on his thigh.

Anzam saw that the call was from home. That meant that it was from Sonali. He took the call, pressed the green button and held the set to his ear, "Yes?"

Sonali, sounding slightly irritated, asked, "What's going on?"

"What's going on?"

"Can't get you in your office room. No one is picking up the phone. You weren't receiving the mobile phone either."

"I'm standing before a battlefield, Sonali! A war is on."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I had a meeting with the MD, which is why the ringer was muted. Then came to know that out on the street here two gangs are waging a pitched battle to gain control over the area. White Kalam and Tiffin Babu."

"That would be what? White Kalam Tiffin Babu...!"

"Babu used to supply meals in tiffin carriers to offices. Now he's a gangster known as Tiffin Babu. And White Kalam, that's kind of self-explanatory - he's fair complexioned, that's why he is White Kalam. Wait, Sonali, he is bringing his hand down..."

Anzam wouldn't know this himself but his hand came down as well. His eyebrows scrunched, his eyes narrowed as he muttered in subdued groans "E-e-e-s-s-h, eeesh!" The same utterance reverberated around him. Some one of course had yelled aloud, "Gone, that one is gone!"

One boy had been caught by a group of men from a rival faction. One of them dangled a knife eyeing to kill the captive. The long sun-dazzled knife hovered in mid-air for a while and then came down with a clean precision, right on target. Anzam picked up the mobile phone, "What a kill, Sonali... That huge knife kept plunging in and out... What a lot of blood to have in a body! You know, how it jets when you turn on the shower in the bath... Sonali, why did you call?"

"Was there any firing?"

"Yes, some. Bet there will be some more soon."

"Listen, Anzam, don't brag. I know you are standing in front. God knows when a bullet might hit you! Please move away."

"Not to worry, Anzam lowered his voice. I'm, right at the back. There are some people in front of me. Don't worry. I'm careful when these things happen."

"Careful, are you? Don't I know you..."

"Why did you call?"

"Today is Shantanoo's birthday. I forgot to remind you this morning."

"Are we going?"

"Aren't we? They insisted we do. And..."

"Sonali, wait... The phone came away from the ear and then it was back again. They have thrown the dead body away, did you get that..."

"Is it alive?"

"Didn't I just say dead body? Just like when white pumpkin flesh is perforated before it is soaked in syrup... that's how it is. Not only with a blade but with iron rods..."

"What has the country come to! To just kill like that out of nowhere - listen, we ought to go to Shantanoo's birthday."

"That's going to dent the purse. Any old present won't do, will it?"

"That's true, but just consider the benefits of striking a relationship with Shafqat Bhai and Zarina Bhabi?"

"Here we go again, someone else is being pursued... Sonali do you think we will be able to reap something out of this 'relationship'?"

"Certainly! They are so much richer than we are and haven't they still invited us to their son's birthday at a grand hotel? Haven't they asked us repeatedly to join them? And here you are talking of benefits! What benefits are there to be had... they will help you clinch a business deal. That's about it, right?"

"Hmmm... Sonali, can you hear the gunshots?"

"Did another one get killed?"

"Not yet. But at least a few are likely to... e-e-e-s-s-sh!"

"What is it?"

"Can't be giving you a commentary this way... And my phone bill is mounting. I'll tell you when I get home."

That he had said he would recount the event when he got back had quite slipped his mind. He bought a gift for Shantanoo spending a pretty sum. He told Sonali the cost and said, "See that this does the trick."

The skirmish outside between Tiffin Babu and White Kalam and the wrangle inside with the MD over staff demands fizzled out before the day at the office was over. The fracas outside went on till lunch hour. No one stepped out during the lunch hour. A few just rushed to collect their packed lunches and sped back to the roof. When the feud stopped, the MD slipped away. The others too left one by one.

Sonali liked the gift, she had said. Shafqat Bhai and Zarina Bhabi would be sure to like it. In fact, if Zarina Bhabi approved, that would do.

Anzam repeated himself grittily, "See that this does the trick."

Sonali laughed, "It will. Just leave it up to me... I am not too mad about the fact that you are a puny executive."

"Meaning that you don't get to spend all that your heart wishes to, right?"

"Looks like you are making it look like that's wrong of me! Wouldn't you too rather spend without a care?"

"Absolutely," Anzam grinned. "If the wallet is not a hefty one, do you know what it feels like? It feels like as if there is no money, just rump. Money is protection for the rump."

"There you go again, with your foul mouth. Really, I've noticed this, you can't seem to say anything in a simple way," Sonali's face reflected mock-disapproval. That too disappeared. She surveyed Anzam from hand to foot.

"What is it?"

"I should have done this as soon as you walked

in."

"What?"

"Tiffin Babu... God, the name is enough to make one giggle... You witnessed a fight between Tiffin Babu and White or Mite whatever... I should have checked if you're in one piece or have come back riddled with holes."

Anzam replied, "No, I'm back with as many orifices as I had in the morning. The hope of getting some more - but you since you are so good in Bangla, I should correct myself and say the fear of getting some more holes can never be ruled out..."

"You showed a bit too much bravado standing in the open with bullets flying around..."

"Didn't I tell you, I was in the right spot. I had people in front of me, on my sides too."

"Nevertheless. How many went down?"

"That is exactly what I was going to tell you. Never had that kind of close encounter before."

"So tell me all about it... Out with it."

Anzam said, "Sonali, people have become very brutal."

"Is that so?" Sonali quipped. "And you think we didn't know that!"

"We do... but still." He yawned as he said 'still'. He sat on the bed. Sonali sat beside him. Anzam played with Sonali's fingers. "I know," he said again, "but knowing and watching are not the same. See, back in the past if one was cornered by a few from the opposing faction, they'd beat him up. There have always been fights. But back then it was a time when there would be a punch, a jab, a slap, a kick that's about it. Now they start with a hockey stick. This is..."

"Anzam, you weren't a student of history if I am right?"

"No. I was just lecturing you a bit or you could call it an introduction if you want."

"No need. Everyone knows these things. Go on."

"If one has an axe to grind then a few bullets could get that done. But if someone wants to vent one's rage then... No, one didn't go for bullets. The knife does it, sinking its sharpness here and there. The iron rod pierced the eye, the hockey stick thwacked against the face, the cleaver came down with a bludgeon... Didn't you wear a bra?"

"In this kind of weather? And who asked you to touch that?"

"No one. I can feel the heat, though."

"Stop that! Remove your hand."

"Why remove my hand? Listen, they killed four right in front of our eyes. Later the police, I learnt, took the fallen to the hospital. But who would pull through after injuries like that? Even if they do make it, they will be done for life. From gangster to beggar, that is what their fate will be."

"Has that made people shy away from *mastaani*? It is on the rise. And violence too."

"Gosh, if you want to eliminate someone, you can do it in one go... Why have him pinned on the round and pulverize his head with a brick?"

Sonali nodded. She looked at Anzam and laughed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Business is a form of *mastaani*. Rubayet Bhai said so."

"That's because his business venture flopped, that's why. And even if business is like *mastaani*, it is not as crude. You don't need to chase someone with a cleaver."

"Don't be so certain... I will get you the deal through Shafqat Bhai and Zarina Bhabi but what you will be able to do with that is the real issue. The use of the cleaver, you say, is on the rise again, is it?"

"Very. The way they did it today - Sonali, one was