FICTION

The kaboom coverage

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

The university administrative team thought that the threat was a prank, and a rather crude one at that. An email was sent to all the department heads, threatening to bomb the university on Wednesday at exactly 2 PM. Nevertheless, security was tightened for the next week, and it was decided not to create mass hysteria by letting the students know.

Naturally, the news spread within a few hours, and the bite-sized media houses were the first to pick it up. Some self-appointed sub-editor was going through his social media feed and saw a mutual friend's post about the bomb threat their university had received. Five minutes and three AI prompts later, it was posted as news on Bombshell Daily.

Around the same time, at the other end of town, in the newsroom of PrimeHub News, Rahat had been scrolling through his social media feed, trying to find content for his fifth article of the night. That'd finally fill his quota for the day and let him go home for the night.

On any other day, Rahat would've just pasted the post into AI, told it to write a full-fledged article and posted it on the website. But this was different. At 12:37 AM on that fateful Sunday night, Rahat saw something that no one else in the media trainwreck had the vision to see. He saw an opportunity.

Rahat knew a bomb threat deserved more than just a photocard on social media. No, it demanded more. He immediately called his editor, Subrata Bagchi, on his personal number. Mr Bagchi's personal number was off-limits, apart from exceptions, and to Rahat, this was an exception.

"Mr Bagchi," Rahat said before his editor could start shouting, "bomb threat at Atlantic University. This is big."

"It's some stupid student pulling off a prank, Rahat," said Mr Bagchi. "You shouldn't call me at 1:00 in the morning over this."

"No, sir. It's not about the actual threat. It's about what this threat could multiply into," said Rahat with a smile.

"What do you mean?" Mr Bagchi sat up.

"The email mentioned a time, sir," explained Rahat. "Wednesday, 2:00 PM. There have been cocktail and crude bomb blasts all over town in the past few months. Sure, they stirred up the internet for a while, but then people forgot about them the next day. Why? Because the coverage happened after the actual incident. That's the problem, sir. The media always arrives after the incident occurs. But now, for the first time ever, the media will be present before the incident."

The phone was dead silent on the other end. Rahat could hear Mr Bagchi's breathing, which was a good sign. For the first time ever, Mr Bagchi was listening.

"Think about it, sir: live coverage, a countdown, a drone's view of the blast, pre-blast talk shows, post-blast discussion sessions. The possibilities are endless," said Rahat. "At least a month's worth of photocards to be posted on our social media."

"But there aren't going to be any blasts, Rahat," said Mr Bagchi. "It's just some stupid, outraged kid on his laptop sending out angry emails."

"We don't need the blasts, sir!" explained Rahat. "We simply need the content we can generate out of it. We've got at least 72 to 96 hours before the deadline. Think of all the engagement we can generate before that!"

Mr Bagchi stayed quiet for a bit longer and hung up the phone. Fifteen minutes later, he was in the office along with the rest of his team, with Rahat in that big meeting room for the first time in his life.

"The next 72 hours are going to be big, gentlemen," Mr Bagchi explained to the room. "I want all of you in the office around the clock until Thursday. Right after we start, other channels are going to pick it up as well. We need to make sure we have all our content ready so that we can throw everything out at the same time without giving others the space to breathe."

The next 24 hours were utter chaos at the PrimeHub News office. Talk-show guests were brought in late at night and put in front of the camera to debate the bomb threat and discuss the government's failure to handle it. A countdown timer was put in the bottom corner of the broadcast. Four separate teams were dispatched immediately to cover every possible view of the campus. One of them was stationed on the rooftop of a nearby house to get the best possible view of the campus interior. Mr Bagchi was trying to get a helicopter in the air as well to get a bird's-eye view of the event.

Another team was sent to the Tamabil border of Bangladesh to report how Bangladeshis were migrating en masse out of the country, fearing impending terrorism. However, that team was only able to get footage of a few smugglers walking in and out across the border at night, along with a few cows unaware of international border protocols.

"Smugglers are citizens as well," explained Mr Bagchi over the phone. "Cows also have every right to fear terrorism and escape the country. Just get me the footage and let me handle the narrative."

The media on the other side of the border picked up the news as well and managed to mould it into their own agenda. The news spread like wildfire, on a scale unlike anything Rahat had imagined. Not just Atlantic University, but universities all across the country were shut down for fear of explosions. Protests, boycotts, mob attacks: the country faced more damage in the three days leading up to Wednesday than it would have in the actual explosion.

On Tuesday night, at around 8:30 PM, Rahat noticed Mr Bagchi hovering around his cubicle until he finally approached and said, "Rahat, we can't keep this thing alive much longer after 2 PM tomorrow. When people realise that the explosion was just a harmless prank, we won't be able to maintain our TRP ratings much longer."

"The last three days have been the experience of a lifetime, sir," Rahat said gratefully. "The channel has had more traffic in the past three days than in the rest of the year combined."

"Yes, it's truly unprecedented. But there's only one person who's ambitious enough to realise the true potential of this news." Mr Bagchi placed his hand on Rahat's shoulder. "You, Rahat. You were the only one who saw potential in this, and you're the only one who can comprehend how big this news can get if the explosion were to take place. We're talking about seven more days of live coverage, international engagement, a social media fiasco and coverage of the subsequent chain of events as well. It'll make our channel the biggest news channel in the country over the weekend."

"But as you said, sir, it's just some kid pulling a prank," said Rahat. "It's not really in our hands."

"But it can be, Rahat." Mr Bagchi walked with Rahat into his chamber and closed the door behind him. "We can just create a small explosion, nothing too outrageous. Just a small crude bomb."

Rahat was at a loss for words, too dumbfounded even to process what was being proposed.

"I've got someone on the inside," Mr Bagchi explained. "A security guard who'll let you in. The CCTV cameras will be off as well. It's just an in-and-out job, and you're the only one I trust. Do this for the channel, Rahat, and I'll make you senior correspondent next month. You'll be the youngest one in the channel's history."

"Just a small blast, sir?" Rahat asked, his voice barely a breath. "No one gets hurt?"

"Nobody," Mr Bagchi promised, patting Rahat's shoulder with warm, paternal authority. "Just enough noise to keep the national spotlight on us for another week."

The next few hours blurred together. By 11:15 PM on Tuesday night, Rahat found himself standing in the shadows outside the main gates of Atlantic University, clutching a heavy leather duffel bag Mr Bagchi had handed him in the parking lot. The night air was thick and silent. Just as promised, a security guard stepped out of the guard booth, nodded silently and unlatched the side gate. The man didn't say a word; he just gestured towards the central academic building.

Rahat slipped inside, his sneakers squeaking faintly on the polished marble floor of the lobby. The building was empty, swallowed by darkness. The CCTV cameras overhead showed no blinking red lights. Disabled, just like Mr Bagchi had said.

His hands trembled as he unzipped the duffel bag near the lift to arm the device. But as the zipper pulled back under the dim beam of his torch, Rahat froze.

There was no crude explosive inside.

Instead, the bag was stuffed with stacks of forged press credentials, three prepaid burner phones and a thick blue folder stamped with the emblem of a banned regional militant group. Nestled right in the centre was Rahat's own press badge, neatly pinned to a handwritten manifesto written in a scrawl that mimicked his own handwriting.

Before Rahat's brain could fully process what he was looking at, blinding white floodlights cut through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors of the lobby.

Sirens wailed, tearing through the quiet night. Heavy boots pounded against the concrete steps outside.

"Counter-Terrorism Unit! Hands where we can see them! On the ground now!"

Rahat dropped to his knees, his hands flying into the air, the torch tumbling from his grip. Through the glaring headlights outside, he saw the sleek black van of PrimeHub News parked right behind the police barricades. On top of the van, a high-definition camera rig was already elevated, its lens pointed straight through the glass doors, capturing his terrified face in crisp, broadcast-quality 4K.

Standing right behind the camera operator, illuminated by the red-and-blue strobe of police cruisers, was Subrata Bagchi. He wasn't cowering. He was calmly whispering into a lapel mic, giving a live, breathless play-by-play to millions of viewers tuning in across the country.

"We are bringing you live, exclusive footage from Atlantic University, where PrimeHub News has helped law enforcement foil a major terror plot," Bagchi's voice rang out through the broadcast speaker outside. "In a shocking turn of events, the suspect has been identified as a rogue field reporter operating within our own media ecosystem."

The police slammed Rahat onto the marble floor, cold steel cuffs snapping tightly around his wrists. As he was dragged towards the exit, his eyes locked with Mr Bagchi's across the glare of the searchlights. Bagchi didn't look angry or guilty. He gave Rahat a subtle, approving nod. Rahat had just bought the channel its ticket to the top.

There was never going to be an explosion. Subrata Bagchi didn't need a bomb to create the ultimate story. He just needed a villain.

By 2 PM on Wednesday, while Rahat sat in a windowless interrogation room struggling to convince detectives that he had been set up, PrimeHub News had hit an all-time high TRP rating. The live arrest of "The Terrorist Journalist" had shattered national viewership records.

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ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**



PHOTO: **MAISHA SYEDA**

POETRY

Winter house

NUBISHA RABYA TOPOTE

The rain has stopped.
The calendar has gone barren,
each date picked clean
like a tree after winter.
I fixed the water filter myself.
There was something almost holy
about making water run again
with these hands that shook
all night from screaming.
My throat is still a little graveyard
of words I should not have said.
You left without your charger,
as if you meant to return it.
You took an umbrella,
but the weather betrayed you anyway.
Now it is freezing.
I cannot tell
if the cold is coming through the windows
or from the ghost of your breath
still sleeping against my neck.
Yesterday, the rain came down so hard
it sounded like the sky
was trying to break into the house.
I told you not to come back.
I meant it
in the way a dying woman means
she does not want the doctor
to turn the light on.
And yet—
if the doorbell rang tonight,
I know I would run.
Barefoot.
Before the second ring.
Before reason could put its hand
over my mouth.
I would open the door
and let you in
just to make another storm,
just to stand beneath its wreckage
and pretend, for a moment,
that warmth
was something you could still give me.

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ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

POETRY

going nowhere (fast)

ARWIN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE

a hundred fathoms
a hundred hundred light years
all roads lead nowhere
quickly. we make haste
from scratch, from flour and water and one egg,
one careful batch of hurry in an oven set to forever.
yet all roads lead nowhere
we are going nowhere, quickly
traversing oblivion at a million billion kilometers per second, ten times that,
a hundred times:
you are a point at the center of this universe
i am stood, arms outstretched on either side;
we are perfect strangers, parallel lines converging at infinity

Arwin Shams Siddiquee *is a former intern at Star Books & Literature.*