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J Series

J9

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu.**

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# Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

## Part 9

### Thirty-six

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 specialized 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 maintained a respectable distance from him but were now closing the gap. Vijay was oblivious to their following, 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.

## Thirty-seven

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 closely 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.’

## Thirty-eight

The IG4 had met the previous week at a bungalow located in the Lutyens Bungalow Zone.

Named after the British architect Edwin Lutyens, the area was neighbour to the impressive Rashtrapati Bhawan, the official residence of the President of India. Around a thousand exclusive residential bungalows were located in this zone and less than 10 per cent of those were in private hands.

The IG4 venue had been arranged by Sharma. The house belonged to a steel magnate who had shifted base to Singapore. He often loaned the house to powerful and connected friends such as Sharma, besides residing there when he visited Delhi.

The four members were seated in comfortable armchairs in the living room overlooking a sprawling garden that had hosted several high-profile parties. A sleek no-vent fireplace in brushed steel kept the interiors toasty. Bug sweeps had been meticulously carried out earlier in the day.

Petrov had spent the morning reviewing the photographs his aide at the SVR had put together. It had been a mammoth task. Petrov had asked for every available photograph of the four dead leaders to be collected and analyzed. His aide had searched multiple public and private sources to aggregate the photographs. Each picture had then been subjected to face recognition algorithms and additional information from the former Kitchener agent had been used to filter the pictures further.

Before anyone else could speak, Petrov stood up and cleared his throat. 'Have any of you heard of Minerva?' he asked, pulling a file from his briefcase. He had everyone's attention.

'That crackpot group?' asked Judith. 'Much more of a conspiracy theory, right? Like the "Priory of Sion" that turned out to be a con?' The Priory of Sion had been created as a hoax by a Frenchman, Pierre Plantard, in 1956. He had succeeded in spinning a tale that the priory had been founded in 1099, and was committed to installing a bloodline descendant of Mary Magdalene on the throne.

'You may need to revise your opinion,' replied Petrov. 'Minerva has some very high-ranking members, including judges, scientists, businessmen, politicians,

diplomats, bureaucrats and the like as members. And it's not just a social club. It was registered in 1926 as a foundation in Liechtenstein. That indicates a level of seriousness about what they are doing.'

'What is a foundation?' asked Zhang. 'I mean, legally speaking.'

'A foundation is an independent special-purpose fund,' said Petrov. 'It has a legal personality of its own—one that is distinct and separate from the private assets of the settlor.'

'Which also means that it's a dead end,' said Judith. 'Foundations are usually not subject to statutory audit.'

'Ah,' said Petrov. 'They are not subject to audit *if* they do not carry on commercial activity. If the foundation's interests include a commercial enterprise, then an audit board must be appointed. A balance sheet audited by the board must then be submitted each year to Liechtenstein's tax authorities.'

'And is that the case with Minerva?' asked Sharma.

'Yes,' said Petrov, nodding. 'Two of my men at the SVR are on it. Remember the common link across the four deaths? They were all liberals.'

'Minerva has found a way to kill liberals around the world? To what end?' asked Zhang. 'As of now it seems merely a hunch.'

'And even if this secretive group called Minerva does exist,' added Judith, 'how do we tie it to these deaths?'

'If you wanted to eliminate a high-powered individual, you would first need to investigate that person thoroughly, right? Discover their soft spots?' asked Petrov. 'You would dig deep into the person's background, financial position, family life, liaisons, relationships, daily schedule, strengths and weaknesses?'

'Absolutely,' replied Judith.

'If any of the four of us wanted to carry out such an investigation, it would be child's play given our respective intelligence networks,' said Petrov. 'To whom would a private organization such as Minerva go?'

'Kitchener,' replied Sharma effortlessly.

'Precisely,' said Petrov. 'Kitchener Consulting, the most powerful private snooping agency in the world. Available for hire to anyone who has big bucks



to throw. We managed to get hold of one of their former agents in Kiev. Someone that Kitchener had sacked because of his drug habit.'

Petrov handed over a USB flash drive to Judith. 'There are several transactions in the inter-bank settlement system that are highlighted here. You will see that massive amounts have been paid by the Minerva Foundation to Kitchener.'

Judith opened up the file so that everyone could have a look. 'The payments were to Atherton, not Kitchener,' she said, running her eyes down the list.

'Kitchener is owned by Atherton AB,' retorted Petrov. 'As is well known in intelligence circles,' he added acidly.

'Just playing devil's advocate here, the payments could have been for other services,' said Judith in her own defence. 'The Atherton group is not only involved in investigative services but also in employment screening, security management and the like.'

'Open the second file,' said Petrov. 'Photographs of known Kitchener agents. The photos show that these agents have been spotted on several occasions in the vicinity of the four leaders who died. It is evident that Kitchener was used by Minerva to gather information on the targets.'

'The theory is elegant,' said Judith. 'But how are they killing global leaders without leaving any tracks? Symptoms show up, then disappear. No traces left! Poof! And how does Minerva penetrate the thick layer of security that surrounds such high-powered individuals? There are just too many unanswered questions.'

'Personally, I'm convinced,' said Petrov. 'It's most likely an attempt at snuffing out liberal voices so that conservative ones on the far right may be amplified. This would accelerate the world's descent into an all-out war with the Islamic world. Isn't it possible that it's exactly what Minerva wants? *A final solution?*'

The other three members were silent.

'There's one more thing,' said Petrov, looking at the faces of his colleagues one by one. They were now hanging onto his every word. *This is the way it should be*, thought Petrov. *Mother Russia must always stay ahead.*

'I am happy to tell you that we have managed to access the records of Minerva,' announced Petrov.

## Thirty-nine

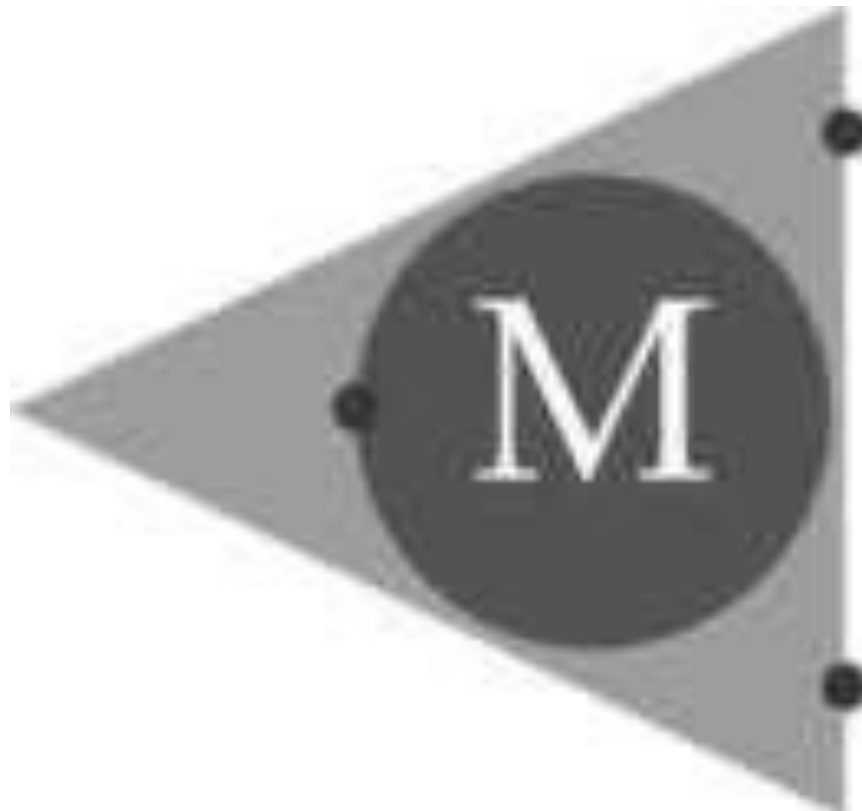
The Russian had kept the best part for the last. It was the icing on the cake. As he said the words, he had glanced at Judith to see her reaction.

Her face had fallen, almost instantly. The Cold War animosity between America and Russia played out at every level, even in the present day. The war in Syria and the allegations of Russian interference in the on-going American elections had ensured that the rivalry continued.

‘More importantly,’ continued Petrov smugly, ‘we now know the names of the commercial enterprises owned by Minerva.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Zhang.

‘There are two,’ said Petrov. ‘One is located in Scotland. It’s called Molecular and Universal Audio. The other one is called Milesian Labs, and the main facility is located just a few hours away from here in the Indian state of Uttarakhand,’ he completed, struggling only momentarily with the name. He held up a photograph that showed the entrance to the Milesian Labs facility. Along the pathway to the gate were flags bearing the Milesian logo.



‘What do these companies do?’ asked Sharma.

‘Molecular and Universal Audio has been established only recently,’ said Petrov. ‘But Milesian Labs is a few decades old. Thus it is Milesian Labs that we need to focus on. The company is involved in research.’

‘What sort of research?’ asked Zhang.

‘Pure science,’ answered Petrov. ‘They pride themselves on not sullyng their portfolio with applied science. They make money by researching and then registering patents. One hundred and sixty-four at last count.’

‘Should we consider sending our operatives inside?’ asked Sharma.

‘You have no idea what sort of facility this is,’ replied Petrov. ‘It’s impregnable, like a fortress. There are less than ten scientists inside a facility that is spread over a thousand acres. Anyone that we send in would be instantly identified, but I think I may have a solution.’

‘And that is?’ asked Judith.

‘One of the senior researchers at that particular facility was originally part of the Russian Academy of Sciences,’ said Petrov. ‘Unfortunately, he is a bit of an oddball—incredibly eccentric. I would have to work on him and that may be too late. Hence, I suggest an alternative.’

‘Who?’ asked Sharma.

Petrov asked Judith to pull up a photograph on her computer screen. It showed a tall, sombre, white-haired man.

‘Who is this?’ asked Zhang.

‘His name is Dr Klaus Schmidt,’ replied Petrov. ‘He is the Chief of Research at Milesian Labs. Once our boys at the SVR got to know about him, we put him under surveillance.’

‘And?’ asked Judith. Her face had turned red. Having permitted the SVR to score over the CIA was hugely embarrassing.

‘He was in Delhi recently to interview a potential recruit,’ replied Petrov. ‘Maybe that new recruit could be our ticket into Milesian Labs.’