

## **THE HEIR (WARIS)**

Everything was becoming blurred. He seemed to be surrounded by a thick fog. First he felt as if he had been caught in a hail storm, then it felt as if his whole body was on fire and hot lava was flowing through his veins. He was losing consciousness. He tried to regain control of himself but his nerves seemed to snap. He tried again though it was like splashing about in an ocean of boiling lead. He was unable to move his fingers. But he would not give up without a fight ... he had to struggle.... At last there was a ray of hope . . . a thin beam of light managed to make its way through a crack in the wall of the dark room.

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It had been an inauspicious beginning. As they entered the city, one of the wheels of the car plunged into a pothole, and they were terribly jolted.

Yesterday, after the court-hearing, they had decided not to travel at night, so had left in the early hours of the morning.

On being jolted, he realized that he had fallen asleep, and sat up straight. He looked at Jeet Singh sitting beside him. As usual, he was alert with his revolver in the holster round his waist. He breathed a sigh of relief, and fixed his gaze on the window pane.

Inspite of his hard-heartedness, he was facing a dilemma. This is not right... not right at all-he tried to rationalise the matter, but got emotionally involved in it. The case ... Vijaypal, the son of Viri Singh ... the court ... the lawyers ... the face of Advocate Bhatnagar ... all came back to him. If such serious allegations as murder and dacoity are made, it is but natural that there will be fifteen to sixteen cases against the accused ... some genuine, others false. But, muscle power has become a corollary to domination, and for that, one has to take risks ... at every step destiny performs miracles. If one has physical might and prowess, destiny is sure to be on his side. And only when destiny is combined with clout, does one come into power. "Power ... big power." Some where at the back of his mind appeared a very confident Tau ji. He tightened his fist and banged the seat in front of him.

"Big powers .... Superpowers.. War.... World War.... Atom Bomb ...." Tauji vanished and the sound of children began resounding in his ears, indistinct as if in a forgotten dream. The power game commenced once again. The school compound was divided into two camps, and amidst the cheering crowd, the game began.

Bhatnagar's face again swam before him. It was as if a child lost at the fair had caught sight of someone familiar. Bhatnagar! The renowned criminal lawyer of Moradabad! He had reached the court and was waiting for some people in his car when through the tinted glass he saw Bhatnagar and his fifteen-sixteen year old son alight from their vehicle. The boy said something, Bhatnagar roared with laughter, and patted his shoulder to reassure. The boy got back into the car and was driven away. Everyone cannot laugh heartily; there are many who pass their

entire lives without even smiling. Only when the conscience is clear can laughter flow like a cascade.

There was nothing unusual about the situation; it was a simple affair. Viri Singh ... his family ... murder... litigation related to a property dispute ... court ... and Bhatnagar ... his growing-up son ... their rapport and innocent laughter was infectious.

Surendra! He had not laughed like that for ages. He did not recall when he had last seen Manoj... blessing his son ... patting his shoulder ... sharing intimacies ... it was a joke! It was impossible because he had always kept Manoj away from him and the family environment.

He jerked his head and the thought fell aside like a crawling insect. Applying the principle 'he who laughs is trapped', he realized that he who broods is lost. He did not believe in reasoning because it weakened a man's resolve. Be on your toes ... be active ... go, go, keep going ... never stop ... live an action-packed life...

They were driving through the vegetable market. It was extremely crowded. A little ahead was a waterbooth, then, a narrow bye-lane, shops on either side, stalls, carts with fruits, vegetables displayed on the ground.

Soran Singh suddenly stopped the car, and Surendra asked, "What's the matter, Chacha? Why have you stopped?"

"*Bhayya ji*, I'll soon be back. I'm going to relieve myself."

"Could you not find a more appropriate place? Don't stop here."

"It's safer here in the bazaar. There's some problem with my kidneys. I can't control myself."

Leaving the engine running, he went behind a kiosk in the bye-lane. Jeet Singh was alert. Guaging Surendra's dullness, he asked, "*Bhayya ji*, do you want a drink? I still have one bottle with me."

Surendra hesitated and then declined the offer.

Jeet Singh rolled down the glasses and began surveying the place. He then wore his goggles and tried opening the door, keeping one hand on his holster.

"*Bhayyaji*, they are selling water-melons. *Bhauji* was asking for them, the other day."

"*Saale*"-A brief smile touched Surendra's lips and got lost amidst his moustaches.

"Go, buy one... quick! *Bhauji's devar!*" He secured the door after Jeet Singh, and touched the revolver in his pocket to reassure himself. They were in their own territory so there was not much cause for worry. What followed was faster than the speed of light. Jeet Singh had barely moved away, and Soran Singh was but a few paces from the bonnet, when a motorcycle stormed towards the car, and two pillion riders shattered the window panes with bullets. Soran ducked, Jeet Singh turned around but was helpless, Surendra tried to take out his revolver in vain. Those shooters didn't give anyone time to think ... they terrorized people ... fired left and right ... threatened and warned onlookers ... and vanished as suddenly as they had materialized.

Being unable to take out his fire-arm, Surendra had somewhat succeeded in trying to rollover and lie on the floor of the car. Before losing consciousness, he was trying to figure out who was the informer and who had betrayed him.

Everyone around was stunned and terrorized. There was commotion, people were screaming and shouting, running helter-skelter. Soran Singh stood up. He was badly shaken. He opened the door of the car and saw Surendra sprawled on the back-seat, all drenched in blood.

Jeet Singh too had arrived. Knowing that delay implied further complications, Soran Singh managed to drive away as fast as he could, Jeet Singh tried to examine if Surendra was still breathing.

"Drive straight to the haveli, *Chacha* ... fast, as fast as you can. Things don't look good."

Soran pursed his lips but said nothing. He just ruthlessly pressed the accelerator. The melee... confusion ... speculations ... all left far behind in smoke and dust.

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The vapour rising from the road had enveloped the haveli... an icy chill where crying was prohibited.

Surendra *Bhayyaji's* associates had all come together, and everyone on the terrace and in the drawing room was alert. An explosive silence pervaded the scene. Two cars were seen constantly doing the rounds. Doctors had been rushed in. There was hope.

There was hope because Surendra had not given up, and was fighting till the last breath. In his unconscious condition, he was circumbulating different planes. He was flying in the sky ... he was on a never-ending journey ... he was visiting the three spheres, peeping into each ... randomly floating beyond the limits of time and space. . . sometimes playing around in the gardens of childhood, and sometimes knocking at the doors of the future . . . praying for the lease of another few breaths, he would return to the present and open his eyes for a while... a familiar face would become blurred by the thick veil of mist ... and again he would launch forth into space, doing the rounds of the spheres.

Sometimes he would begin shivering ... it seemed as if the blizzard had frozen his blood. And sometimes his whole body would begin burning ... it seemed as if the extreme heat would evaporate his entire being.

Sumitra had shed her coyness and modesty, and was sitting amidst the friends, associates and companions of her husband for the first time. These few moments with her dying husband would sustain her for life. Togetherness and intimacies during the light of day had been so few that they could be counted on figer tips. No doubt, he was her husband, her Master... the name of some personal aroma... otherwise, there was nothing which could evoke a smile of shyness or diffidence.

These indelible moments of proximity would become the props of her life hereafter. In spite of the presence of so many people, she was sitting close to him,

staring at his face. Doctors had been busy with their professional work; there was talk about blood transfusion; they had just given an injection which had provided some relief perhaps.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and a sudden longing made her take Surendra's hand; She slowly rubbed it. For the first time she noticed that he had big hands with long fingers; indeed, it was hard, but not like iron as people said. She was getting to know him at last but at what a price!

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Surendra was also trying to discover himself. But the only clue was one that had become a fixation... the scene outside the court ... Bhatnagar and his son ... their comradeship ... that guffaw. Those memories were like a fighter jet performing stunts in the air. young Surendra had broken all boundaries of time and was rudderless. His *Baba* was a teacher in the town, and his mother was a simple housewife. Little Sonu held his father's finger and walked.

"Sonu's mother, your son is very bright. He doesn't forget anything that is taught."

She would smile proudly and hug him.

He would be beside his *Baba* even when he was with friends.

"*Amma, Baba* is also very intelligent. He knows everything. No one can stand before him."

*Baba* had laughed, a hearty laugh, lifting him high above his shoulders, and had embraced him.

Sometimes he tried to open his mouth wide and laugh like *Baba*, "Ha, ha, ha, ha!" His *Baba's* laughter ... Bhatnagar's guffaws ... his son's nonchalance ... all seemed to float with him in the air.

He was gripped by a terrible spasm of pain which ran through his entire body. While floating along, he suddenly began to get cramps. Sounds of gunshots echoed... merriment was replaced with shouts of agony... laughter was overtaken by demoniac shrieks. There was heavy smog all around, and it had penetrated his lungs... he was getting asphyxiated... he couldn't breathe... hiccups set in...

"Doctor! Doctor Saheb! Where are you? He's getting hiccups..." Sumitra yelled as she saw him sink.

More medicine ... another injection ... what else could the doctor do? He can just assist in stabilizing the patient for as long as possible.

There was relief. He felt that he was diving in a pool; the cold water was very refreshing.

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Summer vacations ... Surendra in haveli ... bathing in the canal ... playing around, splashing water.

He ran into the fields ... early-morning fragrance of the dew-soaked earth ... water gushing into the fields. Every day seemed a festival . . . various delicacies ... *kheer, dal-bati* seeped in *ghee* ...

"Have your fill! What can your father-a school *master* provide you with in the

city...?"

Who's speaking? He doesn't want to eat anything. He's leaving the village. Again he began flying towards the heavens. That's where he would stay. He wouldn't linger on earth. But his limbs were failing him, and he seemed to be falling. Someone was pulling him down. He was again drowning ... the same encircling gloom... someone had hurled him into the *pataal*, and like a meteor, he was hurtling towards the unknown ....

Someone was saying, "Catch him ... hold him Don't let him fall!"

Who was that? *Tau ji* was standing with open arms. The *Pradhan* Head man of Lalpur village, tall and broad-shouldered, with big heavy moustaches, the master of immense land, a party to innumerable litigations. A mere sign from him was enough to make or mar people... transfer of land remained just a game of words.

"Catch him!" *Tau ji*'s musclemen, Manglu, Matadin, Ram Singh, were pursuing him.

"Hold him Manglu, Matadin! Hold on to him. Don't let him go. He's my successor, heir to the family property."

"No! I don't want to be anyone's heir, *Babbal* Save me! I don't want to inherit anything. I just want to study and be a teacher like you."

Babba emerged from somewhere, and took a stand, "*Bhai Saheb!* We'll fend for ourselves in the city. We don't want your inheritance. And if you persist, we'll stop coming to the village."

"Virendra, you don't seem to be my brother from any angle! How has our blood been polluted! I want you to understand that Surendra is not only your son, he is heir to the family fortune. Your *Bhabhi* passed away, and I didn't marry a second time. Your nephew drowned, and I accepted it with fortitude. You and your son became the props of my life. Do you think that I'll let go of the property, and allow it to go to dogs?"

"This bloodshed! These fabricated cases! All this is beyond me, *Bhai Saheb*. Besides, I'm sure they will not entail any blessing for us."

"Oh, my brother Virendra, these are symbols of power. The reality is that power is life! You can rule the world only if you have power otherwise no one will be bothered with the likes of insects and other crawling creatures that are simply born and die! Come on, Surendra, rise! It's not yet time for you to descend ... rise up!" And two strong hands lifted him up.... he was ascending higher and higher in *Tau ji*'s arms. He was struggling and begging to be free ... but *Tau ji* merely gave a mirthless laugh. He then threw him up towards the sky, "Go, enjoy yourself! Play and have fun! I will never allow my heir to drown like that."

He was suspended from the sky like the mythical *trishanku*, upside down. He was making vain efforts to be free. He was exhausted, and panting ... his breathing again became laboured.

\* \* \*

Sumitra was apprehensively observing her husband struggling between life and death.

Surendra moved his eyes and lips. He wanted to vehemently decline *Tau ji's* offer. "*Bhauji*, we are trying our level best. But, if you don't mind, I think we should send for Manoj."

"Send someone with the car, and he can be here by tomorrow. Say that his father's condition is serious and he should take leave from school for a couple of days."

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Manoj ... my son Manoj ... I haven't seen him for ages. This time when he comes, I'll keep him with me like Bhatnagar. I'll go out with him like *Baba*. But where? Where will I take him? Out ... in the fresh morning air ... beside the cool waters of the canal ... returning home at sundown, beneath the sanguine sky, amidst the tinkling of the herds. But everything was lost in the corridors of the court. All merriment and laughter vanished with the smoking gun.

Atlast Surendra is so relaxed. No arguments or counter-arguments, no pistol or dagger stuffed into socks and shoes, no revolver hurling beneath the pillow. He is flying ... nothing is obstructing his flight ... like an astral body he will be doing the rounds of the spheres ... there is absolute peace ... a pervasive fragrance of flowers ... a rose.

"*Bhau ji*, its evening. If there are any *agarbattis*. Light some and put them at the head of *Bhayya ji* bed."

The entire room became fragrant with the scent of roses.

Sumitra's eyes became filled with tears. Never before had anybody in the house thought of lighting lamps and essence at dusk because for them the entire concept of day and night rotated round *Bhayya ji*. It was day when he was home, and night when he was away. The wife of the heir to the *haveli* would get up at the slightest sound which would definitely not be the pleasant tinkling of her bangles or anklets. If ever she got some moments with her companion, which were few and far between, they were devoid of the beauty of floral fragrance; rather, the putrid stench of intoxicants would seep through to her very soul. At the time he would just be her master, sweeping her along in the typhoon of his lust only to abandon her on some unknown deserted island from where she would have to undertake the journey back home all alone.

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Ages seemed to lapse since he went into the oblivion, but no one had wanted it this way; it was all a matter of fate. Sometimes one thinks that he is chalking out his own destiny, but Fate mocks him, knowing it is the Unseen Powers that are the puppeteers. Could *Babba* succeed in extricating himself from the web of life inspite of his constant struggle? Was he able to thwart eventualities that suddenly overcame him?

What initially seemed a mild illness soon took the form of cancer, and it became another struggle, which he lost. *Tauji* attributed it all to the will of God.

*Babba* had succumbed to Time, but for Surendra it became death in life. He and his mother were forced to return to the village, and his heart and mind were enslaved in the family mansion. Finally *Tauji* won, and was victorious! Surendra

was declared the heir.

It was a strange world with *patwaris*, *tehsildars*, farmers, labourers, Tauji's associates and friends, his goons, their lathis, expletives, village chaupal, their special own room, comradeship, laughter, alcohol, intrigues... everything except books. There was nothing like datelines and maps. Stories and files of litigations took the place of legends and anthologies.

He, however, continued his studies at the local High School.

He had imagined his uncle to be an invulnerable deity, a sorcerer who could perform miracles. But his mighty *Tauji*, the village Pradhan Jogindar Singh, had been shot dead right in front of the court. Surendra was badly shaken and terrified. Now there was no one he could call his own.

He was surrounded by his uncle's cronies. Jeet Singh's father, Tejvir had been *Tauji's* right-hand man; Soran Singh was a tried and tested servant, privy to everything that had gone on; innumerable other parasites as welcome-partners in good and evil. They were the ones that were now his body-guards. It was time for them to repay their debt of gratitude to their *Pradhanji*. So they pledged their allegiance, life, and every drop of blood in the service of his nephew. As for Surendra, for the first time he realized the significance of servitude and loyalty.

But *Amma* was adamant on returning to the city. She didn't want him to get involved in village politics, and wanted him to sell everything and go back to his studies.

*Amma's* determination, his conflict and silence created a strange ambience and activity in the village. *Tauji's* clique was in a dilemma and felt threatened. Should the property be sold, what would happen to them, where would they go for a livelihood?

"*Choti malkin*, here atleast we are with you, and nobody dare touch Surendra *Bhayya*."

"In the city you'll have no one to turn to, *malkin*. Besides, selling off your property will not put an end to age-old family rivalries."

"The family honour of Lalpur is also at stake. Just think what would people say should you dispose of the entire land and escape to the city like jackals."

A strange tug-of-war was going on between family pride and honour, virility and impotency. They had fixed themselves there, keeping a strict watch on visitors, not letting him move out of sight. Not only that, they put in every effort trying to groom him into their concept of a macho man!

He was growing up, and had started drinking. He had lost his diffidence and indulged in all kinds of banter and jokes. Everyone except *amma* was satisfied, and she kept weeping.

\* \* \*

Mahipal came panting and puffing, "That Junior Yadav! Viri Singh Yadav came to see the *lekhpal*. Though he came furtively, I came to know of the visit ...."

Tejvir sat up. "There were rumours that he was up to something, tampering with land deeds, prevailing over people, but now he has the audacity to show up

here! He has to be taught a lesson!"

Taking a decisive stance, he said, "We have to take drastic action! He has overreached himself, and if he's not checked other dogs will come and defecate at our very doorstep. Come on, *Bhayyaji*, let's go! You have to be initiated today."

"Where, Chacha?"

"Abe, nephew of your Chacha, let's move! You have to avenge the murder of your *Tauji* today."

"No *Chacha*! You can do whatever you want. Leave me out of it."

"This Mauzer has been lying with you for days. Come on, see how it works! Here, take it." In spite of the highly charged atmosphere, Tejvir burst into laughter.

The revolver was thrust into *Bhayyaji*'s hand, and the five of them took off on motorbikes.

Viri Singh had already left the *lekhpal's* house, donning a *pugree* and hiding his face in its folds. They hemmed him in right at the centre of the market. Surendra *Bhayyaji* lost his nerve. Tejvir felt that he would collapse, so supporting him with one hand, he fired with the other. Three more revolvers went off simultaneously. The collective effort was bound to succeed!

Surendra seemed to regain consciousness with the shots. In a state of torpor, he saw Viri Singh struggling between life and death before succumbing to his wounds.

He did not see or hear Mahipal threatening onlookers with his revolver, people running helter-skelter making different speculations. He was only aware that Tejvir had whispered in his ear, "You will now fire upon this dead man. Fire, before I shoot out your brains!" Tejvir's eyes were blood-shot, and he had turned into a belligerent wolf that becomes more aggressive when faced with the threat of its prey being snatched away.

He was in a state of absolute shock, but could feel Tejvir's revolver prodding his back. Looking around, he saw Mahipal, Soran, Rampal, waiting hungrily to pounce on their quarry. He felt cornered, surrounded by gluttonous wolves that had tasted blood and were insatiably waiting for more.

He yearned to throw away his weapon and just lie there beside his *Tauji's* inert assassin, leaving the rest to chance. But none of that was possible. With trembling hands, steadied by Tejvir, he took aim and pressed the trigger. The shot pierced his very soul, but Tejvir was not satisfied, "One more! Another one, I say! Go on!"

In a stupefied state, he did as he was told, and pressed the trigger again, and again, and yet again, till his fingers bled and his soul was shattered into bits. The whole *bazaar* observed the spectacle in silence.

He didn't know when it all ended.

Tejvir shouted, "Long live *Bhayyaji*!" Lifting him off the ground and bundling him onto the motorbike, they sped away.

The entire area was buzzing with the news that Surendra had avenged the murder of his *Tauji*. Everyone was stunned into speechless. After all, it would be



foolhardy to nurture enmity with the crocodile when you have to share the same space with him.

The initiation was being celebrated some distance away in a dark room. The young heir had taken charge, was now their master and would sustain them.

Soran Singh whispered to Mahipal, "It shouldn't have happened, *yaar!* There was no need to drag an innocent boy into this filth. We will manage somehow or the other, but please spare him."

Mahipal was drunk. "Soran Singh, how can we survive without a master? We spent our entire lives as sharp-shooters for *Pradhanji*, what else can we do at this stage?"

"*Abe* Soranva, if a horse befriends the grass what will it eat!" Tejvir chided him, and once again immersed himself in revelry and carousal.

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"*Bhauji*, at last there is hope! *Bhayyaji* will live!"

"Our *Bhayyaji* is not so frail after all ! He is tough, a macho man!"

"Once our *Bhayyaji* is up and about we will not spare our enemies. We'll chop off their hands and legs and leave them in the jungle for vultures and jackals."

"Two days have lapsed , Chacha. For every moment of his life, *Bhayyaji* has put up the struggle of a life time!"

Infact, he had fought for every breath, relived every single moment of his life, cherishing each euphoric memory.

He could now sense Sumitra's presence. He had never even looked at her properly. He realized, for the first time, that she was a beautiful and elegant woman.

\* \* \*

"Papa ... Papa, what has happened to you?" Another sound pierced his consciousness.

"Papa!" He felt that someone had emerged from the billowing clouds and was riding on his back.

"Papa .... Papa!" His wings had been tied and his flight restricted to a downward trend ... he landed on earth at last.

While tossing about in the dark recesses of oblivion, he had totally forgotten that he was no astral being, but an inhabitant of the earth who could not traverse the heights and depths of the universe.

"Papa .... Papa!"

It had taken him ages to land back on earth. He tried to push open the heavy iron gates .... His strength seemed to fail, but he didn't give up .... a beam of light crept in....

That face ... it was familiar ... he knew it ... it resembled him. Behind, a pair of sparkling eyes, above which glowed the brightness of sindur on forehead.... The mist lifted ... visibility improved ... recognition dawned on him.

"Papa.... Papa!"

"Manoj ! My son, Manoj !,, His lips moved, and he again became aware of the

excruciating pain.

"Manoj, your father opened his eyes only after you arrived."

"*Bhayyaji* has been fighting death for the last three days. You better do something to avert the evil eye."

Sumitra was wiping her tears. Like Savitri she had wrenched her Satyavan back from *Yamraj* !

"*Bhayyaji* is no ordinary man, *Bhai*! There's no one born of woman that can so easily do him in."

"Offer *prasad* to propitiate the Gods."

Our *Bhauji* is a *Devi* incarnate. All this is the munificence of *Sati Mai*."

Sounds and visages once again got super-imposed and confused. Manoj was bending over him, and Surendra trembled to see the future reflected in his eyes. But he could barely utter, "Manoj, my son!" He wanted to take him in his arms and fly towards the heavens . . . far-far away from the bogs of conspiracy . . . into a world of peace and tranquility ... where there would be majestic snow-clad peaks, gurgling streams, green fields ... only Nature would teach him the secrets of life.

He was wondering what his son was doing here. This was not the life he had envisaged for him. He wanted to keep him away from the very shadows of these bad wolves.

"O God!" He groaned.

"*Bhayyaji* is saying something. Dear Manoj, it's only because of you that his speech is returning."

"He's *Bhayyaji*'s heir after all! It's no trivial matter!"

Another heir! Who's the heir!! And heir to whom!!!

He yearned to tell his son, "Run ... Manoj, run .... You are not anybody's heir ... not even mine .... You are not bound to anyone, and are free to do as you please.... Go, run far away .... Here you'll be ensnared by predators .... They will initiate you into rites of cannibalism.... You will openly eat the flesh of a corpse .... You will bring a dead body on your back and they will celebrate .... They will revel and partake of more human flesh .... My son, run ... run as far as you can ... away from these cannibals ... run ... run ..." But he could merely mumble his name.

He kept moving his lips, trying to speak in vain. He gave up and began sinking into the vast ocean ... nothing on heaven or earth could now prop him up ... he was drowning ... going down ... further down ... lower down into the depths and darkness.

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