CHAPTER ONE

Eastward

In 1957, Achankulangara Namboodiripad Krishnan sits on the side veranda of his rented home in Madurai in the state of Madras, South India, three wet betel leaves clutched in his hand. With the end of his shirt tail, he wipes them dry. Opening a silver box in which he keeps condiments, he spreads pink lime paste with a silver spoon on each of the three leaves using his bent knee to hold them together. From another pot he uses his fingers to sprinkle fragrant betel nut shavings spiced with cloves and cinnamon over the paste. The final layer is sweet grated coconut. After rolling the leaves, he places the packet in his mouth and chews. He does this slowly, for the roll is rather large and his tongue often gets caught between his teeth. He savours the burst of flavour filling his mouth, leans back and closes his eyes. A drop of the betel juice trickles down his throat. It is sharp and peppery. His taste buds tingle. The back of his mouth becomes numb. He wants more. Now there is a dizzy sensation that starts at the back of his eyes.

Just what he is looking for. Not bad at all.

He swallows the betel leaf and coconut juice accumulating in his mouth and takes a folded piece of paper from his pocket. His hands are unsteady as he smoothes it with his palms and goes over the lines once again. 'Transfer Orders,' he reads. 'Achankupfangarat Krishan Nampodhiripadi, you are to report to your new station Dibrugargh, Assam.'

'I've told the bastards time and time again that my name is A.N. Krishnan,' he mutters under his breath, moving the chewed wad of leaves to the other side of his mouth where the juices do their work. 'These Hindi-speaking wallahs will never learn to spell my name properly. And the sons of bitches want *me* to embrace Hindi! Pah! *Nayindamakkal!* Children of dogs,' he curses in Malayalam.

The A is for the town he was born in and the N identifies which social strata he belongs to. Early in his career, he drops his full name and opts for only initials since no one can pronounce it properly. He's also weary of correcting them. Another ulterior motive is to hide his true social standing behind the initials for the Namboodiripads are part of the royal family of Cochin. He thinks it best not to announce his colours. He's even stopped wearing the gold studs in his ears. They only give his status away. Even after all these years his mother can't look him without an air of grievance.

'Ah, to hell with everybody,' he mutters now. 'They deserve the tiniest mounds of white rice on leaves of paper for their cremation ceremonies. And may there be no crows at all for miles and miles. And,' he says this aloud now, 'may they call till they are hoarse and can make no sound.'

He says this in Malayalam, the best language for cursing and uttering evil prophecies. The rice mounds are arranged on clean banana leaves and they attract crows during the ceremony. The quicker the crows come and pick at the rice, the more peace the departing soul can expect. The relatives stand around clapping and calling to the crows to come and get it.

He wishes he has a wad of five leaves instead of three. Then perhaps he would be numb all over. He wishes he could shut his brain off for just a while. His thoughts start to race and he moves his jaw furiously for a moment. And as always, his tongue gets in the way of the last vicious chomp. He screws up his eyes as tears well up in them. A burning sensation accompanies the sharp pain as the lime penetrates the wound. He decides not to swallow the betel juice and spits it out. It clears the concrete floor and lands with an audible splat on a glossy banana leaf from where it slithers slowly down to the next leaf and to the next. His eyes follow its path until the blob drops on the dry earth and he is left with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

This is the thanks he gets for being an honest and hard-working member of the Indian Revenue Service. This is the reward for supporting a family of five, wife Devi and his three children, on a government

servant's salary. He doesn't go to the gymkhana and the turf club like most of them. The membership alone costs a fortune. All he allows is a basket of fruit or sweets at Deepavali. But the gymkhana membership and a basket of fruit are not same thing. He allows it only because they insist so much. He can't stand the constant begging and grovelling. He has noticed the diamonds in the present Commissioner of Income Tax's wife's ears and nose *and* the new car. The Commissioner's children are getting their education in an exclusive boarding school in Ootacamund. He, Krishnan, didn't comment on that. Yet he can't help wondering if the CIT is afraid he might blow the whistle and generate one of those purges that rumble through the musty halls of Revenue Bhavan from time to time. This is the result: this transfer to a place where they can forget all about him. Shove *him* away before the CIT himself gets the shove?

T. S. Devi stands in the doorway with a tray in her hands, their German shepherd, Rufus, at her heels. There is a small stainless steel jug full of hot, sweet tea, a stainless steel tumbler and a plate of spicy *vadas* she's just had fried by the cook, Gopal. She hears her husband mutter and wonders what he is thinking. He sits upright in his chair, his long legs stretched in front of him and his jaws clenched. Like her mother before her, Devi never thinks of her husband as 'Krishnan' or even calls him by his name. Watching him now, she wants to engulf him in her arms and comfort him. She wants to press his tall frame against hers. But she doesn't.

It will only make him frown and turn away.

She sighs softly, her heart yearning for something she knows she can never expect.

She's been his wife for over a dozen years now, yet she still remembers the first time he came to her father's house asking for her hand. She remembers hiding behind the window, her eyes pressed to the slit between the curtains. She was in the room off the hallway with the window looking out on the veranda. Her heart was racing and she threw glances over her shoulder expecting her mother to barge in any minute. He was sitting in the chair with the straight back, his arms resting on the sides. She was so close she could see the hairs on them. She pressed her eyes further into the slit. His jaw was square and he had a high brow. His hair was curly, she could tell. She ran her hand down her own straight hair hanging down over her shoulder. It reached beyond her knees. It was her pride and joy.

He was the oldest son of the Cochin Namboodiripads and quite used to doing things his way. Like how he didn't wear those studs in his ears anymore, and how he worked in the city. She was of age and there was nothing to say against the union. Not that she had anything to say. And not that her opinion mattered anyway. The fact that he had chosen her, a simple country girl, to be his wife dazzled her family. He was handsome and willing to give her a home. There were no doubts in her parents' minds that he was a good choice. Their horoscopes were examined and deemed to be compatible. So she became his wife, content to follow her husband wherever his job took him.

That's who she is.

First and foremost she is A. N. Krishnan's wife, previously known as the daughter of the renowned writer, P.T. Nair. Then she is mother to Anupama, at thirteen the eldest, with her straight hair and her father's quietness; followed by, Kavita, the middle one, nine years old with her father's curly hair and who knows whose exuberance; and Arun, two, also of the famous Namboodiripad curly hair.

This is the third transfer since the birth of their first child, Anupama. She knows the orders are in and she hopes it is Delhi, where her brothers and sisters live, or even Cochin, land of their forefathers. But from the looks on his face, it is probably far, far away.

As she bends to place the tray on the glass-topped cane table, she raises her eyebrows.

'Assam,' he says, sighing, knowing how disappointed she will be.

'Where?' she asks and wipes her face with the end of her sari. She stands in the doorway adjusting the folds in her cotton sari, moving her hips to and fro as she gives in to an itch around her waist. Where the sari touches her body, it is limp from the heat and sweat. The itch is getting unbearable so she slides her finger down her waist and encounters the stiff folds of the sari. She has to tell the dhobi to use less starch next time.

'It's in the east, Devi,' he says, leaning forward to pour tea.

From the jug, Krishnan pours tea into the tumbler, raising the hand holding the jug high above his shoulders. When he is satisfied with the amount of froth in the tumbler, he sits back and sips. He folds his right leg under him, slips the flat of his left hand under his shirt and rubs his stomach. He finds the movement soothing: it could lead to a successful evacuation. For he suffers from chronic constipation.

Rufus sits back on his haunches, ready for whatever comes his way. Now and then, Krishnan throws him a piece of *vada.* When he finishes the tea in his tumbler, he pours what is left in the jug on the floor. Noisily, Rufus slurps through the puddle then sits back again to see if there is more.

'No more,' he says, trying to sound stern.

Rufus licks his chops one last time then flops by his master's side, a loud snort escaping him.

Devi goes back inside to ponder over her future. She wants to retreat to the bedroom to gather her thoughts. But, her family needs her attention. She brushes her hair from her face and tightens the knot once again. Then she goes to the kitchen where Anupama is as usual, standing on her toes and stirring the *vadas* as Gopal, their simple-minded cook, slips them into the hot oil.

'Be careful, Anu,' she warns her daughter, pleased yet apprehensive about Anupama's culinary interests.

'Don't worry, Amma,' Anu says. 'I've done this before.'

Anu's long, black hair is knotted high on her head. Her breasts have just started to grow and they push through the thin cotton of her blouse. With it, she wears a skirt that reaches to the floor. Devi glances quickly at Gopal, wondering if she will have to supervise Anu's forays into the kitchen. But Gopal's eyes are on the pot of hot oil. He nods to Anu, urging her to stand back for a while. Then when the time is right he prompts her to stir.

Devi goes to the front door and calls out to her other daughter, Kavita, who's supposed to be playing on the pavement.

'Anu! Where's Kavita?'

'Don't know, Amma,' she replies, her eyes intent on the vadas.

'Where can that girl have gone?' her mother demands impatiently.

'I saw her going up the street with Renuka,' Anu answers.

'That girl! Never around when I call her,' Devi grumbles.

She now sits on the steps and looks up at the sky, wondering where her younger daughter is.

Assam, Devi thinks. So far away! How will she survive? And yet another language to learn! There will be no family close by to visit. She is going to be very lonely in Assam. In Madurai, she is the wife of a respected civil servant and surrounded by people such as the cook, peons, office clerks, and the sweeper. All day, these people, including her husband are in and out of the house. There is not much privacy. The only sanctuary is the bedroom. But she doesn't mind. It keeps her mind off the loneliness. She has never had a best friend. There never has been anyone to talk things over. There has never been anyone whose advice she can count upon. Nor anyone she can share her thoughts and fears with. She has made all the decisions concerning house and the girls. Soon she would have to do the same for Arun, her *monu*, her darling boy. He is her favourite. But she makes sure she doesn't give her secret away.

Thank *Narayana* he's the youngest, she prays silently. She doesn't have to justify her wanting to keep him, her darling boy close to her heart. Her feelings are normal, she tells herself. There's no need for this wave of guilt rushing through her. It is perfectly acceptable, for he's her only one. For the moment. The older ones, the girls, don't need her love as the boy does.

Anu is on her way to becoming the perfect daughter and will raise her standing in the community when she is married to the perfect boy. She knows that Kavita too will learn and follow in her sister's footsteps despite the fact that they are different as night and day: Anu so quiet and still and Kavita so full of light and laughter. The girls' path is a straight one leading to the same goal: marriage to a suitable boy. And then there is her boy, Arun, upon whom she can lavish all her love. Arun she will keep close to her.

Assam, she knows, is going to be different. All the cities she's lived through the years have influenced her. The languages, food, customs and traditions she has absorbed like a sponge. But Assam will be different. Assam will bring changes. Because Assam is so far away from Kerala and the south of India.

I come running down the street, my locks streaming behind me. I wear a sleeveless, green dress and my feet are bare. I'm a tomboy, always getting my knees scraped, or my head banged. Always out in the world, exploring, discovering and making friends. My mother remembers the time when I was barely four. She's told me the story numerous times. Through her eyes, I can see the scene unfolding before me.

Every morning, perched on Ulagan, the peon's shoulders, I waited for the school bus. The stop was only a short distance from the house. At three, I was picked up by Ulagan again after being dropped off by the bus. One afternoon, I was not on the bus. They searched everywhere and my mother was going out of her mind. My father, ready to head a search party armed with lamps and sticks, was pacing on the veranda. At

six, that evening, I was dropped off at my parents' door, by the same bus driver, on his big, black motorcycle. He lived on the school grounds, he said and he found me watering the plants in his garden with his wife.

Then another time, a Class Four teacher found me so charming, she took me to the zoo with her class. Now, both those times, my mother knew it was the fault of adults and not mine, but somehow I seem to cause her anguish. I'm the explorer with friends in strange places while Anupama is the quiet one who at the age of eight, stopped wearing Western dresses and adopted the long skirt and blouse, so typical of the south of India. My mother can't remember when Anupama had skipped and run like I do.

'Amma! Amma!' I say, as I reach her. 'Anil and Kamala are going to the fair. And Radha Aunty has asked me to go with them. Amma, can I? Please, please say that I can,' I burst out rapidly.

My mother can't help smiling. Ah yes! Not only anguish but also laughter. This child of hers is so full of life!

I can't stand still. I hop from one leg to the other. I clap my hands. Then I wring them together. I fling my arms around my mother and squeeze tightly. I press my lips to her cheeks. Then my two small hands frame her face as she leans back to look at me.

'After you have eaten your tomato and drunk your milk,' she says.

'But Amma, that milk smells bad. It makes the vomit come up from my stomach. Can't I have Horlicks instead? Please, Amma. Cross my heart and hope to die, dear, dear Amma. The milk tastes horrible. If you don't believe me, why don't you try a glass?' I add with downcast eyes.

'All right, all right, you can have it with Horlicks. But you have to promise not to eat anything from the vendors at the fair. You have to change into a clean dress and,' she looks at my feet, 'shoes.'

I look at my feet too, wiggle my toes and nod. 'Is Arun awake? Can I take him too?'

My mother says, 'Only if you hold his hand and not let him out of your sight.'

'I will, Amma. I'll take good care of my little brother.'

I run to Arun's crib where he lies quietly, sucking his big toe. I lean into the crib to tickle his feet. I hook my arm around his small shoulders. Arun raises his chubby arms to loop them around my neck. As I lift him out of his bed he nuzzles my ears and I laugh.

My mother sighs and goes to check on the cooks in the kitchen.

The next day, Krishnan thumps a large book on the dining table.

'Come, Devi,' he says. 'I'll show you where our home is going to be.' He flutters the pages until he finds the right spot. 'There,' he says, pointing.

Devi leans her elbows on the table. 'Assam,' she says slowly, saying it aloud for the first time.

It sounds strange. The sound leaves a strange taste in her mouth.

'Yes. Capital Shillong. Land of thick forests, tea estates and the Brahmaputra. Darjeeling too. That's the place where that tea you like so much grows. And Cherapunji. It's the wettest place on earth. Guwahati. Agartala. Jorhat. Tinsukia. Silchar. Tezpur. Close to Manipur, which has a king and Nagaland. I'll have to tour those places, you know. It's also near the border to China. So army people too.'

'So far away,' Devi murmurs. And so many mountains and rivers to cross from here to there.

'Three days by train to Calcutta. From there it's only two days. That's all.'

'That means no more trips to Kerala.' A shadow falls across her face.

'Not immediately. No. In time, yes. I don't think there will be much money left to buy four tickets every year. You know just as well as I do since you do the accounts.'

She bites her lips as the shadows in her eyes deepen.

To follow him wherever he is sent: That is her duty as a good wife. It does not matter what she thinks. The cards have been dealt. She has to go along. As a good wife, she has to put together a delicious menu, drape silk saris around her and those jewels he's given her and play hostess at least once a month. Now she has to learn to serve tea and cucumber sandwiches to those British wallahs. There will be plenty of them still in Assam around the tea estates and country clubs. That is not the problem. From the first day that he brings her to his home in the city, she manages the kitchen and the servants as if she's been doing it all her life. This too, she knows, she'll take in her stride.

It has never been her choice. She does not know what her choice would've been if she had one. All she knows is that there is this feeling she has. This feeling is creating a hole, a small one right now, but it will grow into a deep, empty well right in the middle of her body. Already her heart is a lump of lead in her chest. There will be no coconut palms in Assam. And no sand. And especially no ocean. All at once, it becomes clear to her that she will miss the ocean the most. Miss it more than being lonely.

‘Acha! Acha!’ I come skipping in, followed by Arun, Anupama and Rufus. ‘Can we see, can we see?’

‘Yes, of course, *molu*, darling girl,’ my father says. He pulls me on his lap and points to the eastern arm of India.

Arun raises his arms to my mother who pulls him onto her lap, while Anupama stands by her side.

‘Shillong. Guwahati. Dibru..Dibru..’ I read the names out loud. ‘What’s this word, Acha?’

‘Dibrugarh. That’s where we’re going.’

‘How far away is that?’ Anu wants to know.

‘At least five days by train,’ my father is smiling as he says this. He knows I love trains.

‘Five days? Five whole days by train?’ Anu’s eyes are round with wonder. ‘We’ve never been *that* long on a train before!’

‘No, never,’ I pipe in. ‘Neither has Rufus. I hope he doesn’t get sick like he did the last time.’

‘That was not the train, silly,’ Anu replies. Being older, she remembers better. ‘That was because he gobbled up that huge portion of *chappatis* and potato curry Amma had put on the window sill to cool.’

My parents glance at each other and smile at the memory.

‘Sometimes he can be real stupid, can’t he?’ my father says, stroking the dog’s head. ‘Did he think that all those *chappatis* were for him? Did you, you greedy pig?’ he holds Rufus’ head between his hands.

In reply, Rufus sticks out a long tongue and licks his face. My father pats the dog on his head one last time and wipes his face with the end of his shirt.

‘That far?’ Anu’s voice is low. ‘Will we able to visit Muthashi during our summer vacations?’

Muthashi is Thankamuthashi, my maternal grandmother.

My father is quiet for some seconds. Then he takes a deep breath. ‘I know how you all love to visit your grandmother. I’m afraid that won’t be possible for some time. You won’t be able to do that every year like you did before.’

At that a deep silence descends upon us, memories of Kerala flooding each mind.

Ever since I could write I’ve composed short letters to Thankamuthashi. That evening too I write to my grandmother.

‘Dear Muthashi,

We are going to Assam. Five days by train, Achan says. We will be living in Dibrugarh and Anu and I will be going to a new school. Achan says Assam is close to China and Tibet. These countries are near the Himalaya Mountains. The very same mountains where Kailasa is in those stories you told me.

How are the cows and goats? We are fine. Hope you are fine too.

Your loving granddaughter,

Kavita.’

I love my Muthashi. Each time I see her, smell her, I get a knot in my stomach. The further we move away from Kerala, the fewer Malayalees we come across and the less chance I have to hear Malayalam spoken. Later as I’m older, I realize it is the fact I don’t see her or Kerala for a long time after moving out east that makes me long for them. Although the move to Assam weakens my link to Kerala pulling out my roots little by little, my mind is filled with images of coconut groves and warm waters, of sandy earth and jasmine flowers, images that remain untarnished by time. I have no bad memories of Kerala. Kerala is the land of backwaters, temples and sandalwood, a place I yearn for with a longing that will never be satisfied.

Sometimes I think it is because I haven’t spent much time in Kerala that I have such a nostalgic view about it. A glimpse of a coconut palm in a picture is enough to transport me back to it.

Krishnan stands on the veranda drinking his morning tea. He swallows scalding mouthfuls of it, rubbing his stomach with one hand. He stares into the air for a second, his head bent to the side as if listening. He hopes to catch a rumble in his intestines that will tell him that the visit to the lavatory will not be a disappointment again. He is a man full of hope. Every morning, he goes through the same ritual: a tumbler of tea, then twenty rounds of brisk walking around the house and he is set for the day. But this morning it is not to be. When he has finished his tea and the twenty rounds, there is nothing but a solid lump in his bowels. During the course of the day, the lump will condense further, eliminating noxious gases. It is going to be one of those days when he will have to sequester himself in his office.

He holds the watering can under the tap that juts out of the wall and fills it. Kneeling near the roses, he reaches into a stainless steel pot that contains used tealeaves, grabs a handful and spreads it under the bush.

‘Darjeeling,’ he murmurs, kneading it thoroughly into the earth. The sharp fragrance typical of the Darjeeling tea wafts to his nose. With a clipper, he snips the faded blooms. Reluctant to throw the petals with the remaining of the garden debris, he crumbles them between his hands and sniffs. He looks around his meagre garden. Other than the four rose bushes and a solitary banana tree, it offers nothing else. Madurai is too hot for too long periods and nothing has time to establish itself before the dry season hits the city. His roses survive only because of his tender, loving care. They droop under the weight of the pink blooms. My father touches the delicate petals.

‘Yes. It’ll be all right. I’ll plant new roses in Assam. And maybe some other flowers too.’

There is never any doubt in his mind. It is the life he has chosen. Without Devi and the children, it might have been difficult, not insurmountable, but difficult. Together with them, it is almost like an adventure.

The bedroom is Devi’s favourite room. It is large and airy. Cream coloured curtains billow in the hot air, filtering light and trapping heat. A fan spins lethargically in the middle of the ceiling. Two tall, grey Godrej cupboards stand against one wall. The twin beds are covered with identical cotton spreads and Devi sits on the one to the left before a stack of magazines already a month old. They are in the two languages she is fluent in: Malayalam and Tamil. She speaks English too that she picked up during her husband’s first and second postings to Bombay and Delhi. She speaks Malayalam at home, Tamil with the servants and English with the wives of the other Income Tax Officers who all have different mother tongues. She hoards the magazines in a metal trunk by the window and reads only one each day, preferring to savour them slowly. Two new magazines in Tamil have arrived that morning with the newspaper. She has learned the intricacies of Tamil because there is nothing else to do in the hot season. Tamil script has nothing in common with her mother tongue Malayalam, yet she masters it in a few months. She likes the Tamil serial novels better than the Malayalam ones. There is something raw and primitive about the language. Love, desire and joy are so vivid that sometimes my mother looks over her shoulder wondering if anyone has caught the flush rising over her skin.

She now bites her lip as the memory of ‘that night’ rises before her eyes. What an ignoramus she’d been! Her only comfort is the realization that he’d been just as nervous. The sound of giggles and suppressed laughter outside their bridal chamber only increased her sense of embarrassment. Even now, she can’t fathom how unprepared she’d been. But then again who was there to turn to? Her unapproachable mother? Her aunt who lived in the side wings answering only to her sister? It had always been ‘Devi, you have to learn how to manage the servants.’ Or ‘Devi, you have to know how smooth the batter for the softest idlis has to be.’ It was what her husband expected of her: To manage the kitchen and house and to be fruitful and bear him children.

Now after twelve years and three children, the shadow of a doubt grows in her heart. There has to be more between a man and a woman than just the softest of idlis. When he turns to her at night it can’t just be need. What about passion? And desire? She wishes that once, just once, he’d hold her in his arms just for the sake of holding her. But Devi’s tongue is tied: tied in a hard knot by tradition and ignorance.

Sometimes she dreams of being held tightly against his broad chest. These dreams are silly. A fantasy ignited by what she reads. Devi smoothes her hand over the well-worn magazine covers. She will take them with her. Without them, she’ll lose her mind in the tea jungles of Assam. What will she do when he is on tour? She’ll have nobody to talk to! What is that language they speak over there? Assamese? Maybe she’ll learn Assamese the way she learned Tamil. Then she’ll be able to read Assamese novels.

The clock in the living room chimes three and with a sigh, Devi gets up. She arranges her books back in the trunk, takes a key from the key chain dangling at her waist and locks it.

Time to prepare tiffin.

In the wet part of the kitchen, Gopal is grinding rice and lentils for the *idli* batter. She bends to swipe a finger in the batter spilling out from the round granite grinding stone and rubs it between her fingers.

‘Little more, Gopal,’ she says, rinsing her fingers in the jug of water next to him.

‘Hunhunh,’ he nods. ‘Maybe fifty strokes more, amma.’

When Gopal is done, she fills the *idli* moulds with the batter and puts the stack of moulds in a large pot of boiling water. While the *idlis* steam, she prepares tea and Horlicks. Using a spoon, she transfers the onion chutney from the rectangular grinding stone into a shallow serving plate. She opens a tall tin and takes out the fried chillies. Krishnan loves to crumble fried chillies in yoghurt to eat with the *idlis*.

Krishnan dips the quill pen into the pot of black ink and signs his name on the bottom of the page. He is a government tax collector and is, at times, also called upon to audit certain citizens. When he became Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax, he had the power to do away with tax arrears of anyone he judged to have simply forgotten to pay their taxes and the government alert enough to remind them of their forgetfulness. Every audit is made to measure leaving all parties happy. The government gets a share, and the citizen leaves his office feeling richer than ever. And never does Krishnan take a rupee for himself.

'This Commissioner-sir is a very good man,' they say and send him baskets piled high with Bombay Alfonso mangoes. Or it might also be *barfis, laddoos* and *sonpapdi* from the DeSouza sweetmeat store.

All this, he accepts with an elegant namaste, for he has inherited the curse of the Namboodiripads: a sweet tooth. He now hits the bell on his large desk with the palm of his hand that always brings Ulagan, the peon, rushing in.

'Good-morning, saar,' Ulagan, in clean khakis announces, saluting. He stands at attention by his side, his shoeless feet tight together.

If he is wearing shoes he'd have clicked his heels, Krishnan thinks.

He's explained to Ulagan that an Income Tax office is not the army and there is no need to salute him. All that falls on deaf ears.

'Take these files to the trunk that I will be taking with me to Assam,' Krishnan says. 'It's in the front room at the house.'

His office is a room in his home.

'Right away, saar,' Ulagan replies. He clamps the files under his arm, salutes and turns on his bare feet.

'And send Thampi in,' Kirshnan adds. Thampi, the head clerk, comes in soon after. Krishnan spends the next hour explaining to him how to initiate the incoming Assistant Commissioner.