

Ten Days in October

Ashish Malpani

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ISBN-13:978-1533500977

ISBN-10:1533500975

To
Samta, Ayan, and our cappuccino machine; if it weren't for you I would
have taken two more years to finish this novel.

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DAY 1 - 5:00 AM

“Jai jai Maharashtra maza ... garza Maharashtra maza ...” The cell phone rang piercing through the dark silence. It was set to the popular Marathi song praising the state of Maharashtra. Inspector Shivaji Chavan was forced to open his eyes. He stretched his arm out and picked up the phone from the side table and glanced at the screen. It was Head Constable Kadam calling him at just past five in the morning.

“Shiv, pick up the phone and go outside if you have to talk,” his wife Madhuri said in an annoyed voice and rolled to her side with closed eyes. Chavan picked up the phone as he stepped out of the room.

“Kadam, what happened? Do you know what time it is?” Chavan almost yelled in the phone. Head Constable Kadam was the only one who got some respect from Chavan and no curse words. “I am sorry Sahib, but the matter is such that I had to wake you up. Sahib, the owner of Kokate Jewelers, Anil Kokate has committed suicide publicly! He was found hanging from a tree on the banks of Pravara River. I don’t have all the details, but I am on my way to the crime scene, I will call you again when I get there. It seems that the crowd has started to gather around, please come as soon as you can.

Chavan put the phone down and walked back to the bedroom with a big yawn. As he stretched his hands, he looked out the window from his room. It was a dark October morning. A dry cold breeze was blowing through the open window of his third-floor apartment. The breeze rattled the dry leaves on the banyan tree outside and gave it a spooky look. Chavan looked away in the dark for a minute and turned his eyes inside the room. There were still boxes on the floor stacked against the west wall. It wasn’t even a week since his wife Madhuri and son Adi had moved to Sangamner. The three bedroom apartment was temporary housing till his bungalow in the police

colony was ready.

“*Allah hu Akbar*” The early morning *aḥan* (Muslim call to prayer) from the nearby mosque broke Chavan’s chain of thought. He saw that Madhuri was asleep again and envied her because she could sleep like a baby with no worries hanging over her head. He slowly kissed her on the forehead.

“Madhuri, hey, wake up; please make me some *chai* (tea). I have to leave for an urgent matter.”

Chavan’s day could never start without a strong cup of *chai*. Madhuri opened her eyes, looked at Chavan and closed her eyes again.

“Hey, please get up and make me some *chai*, quickly.”

“Can’t you make it yourself?” Madhuri was used to Chavan’s work style, and she knew she would have to give in, but she tried regardless.

“Some big shot committed suicide, and his body is hanging from a tree. I have to rush to the crime scene, there is no time please!” Chavan begged.

“Why do people have to die in the night and make everyone else’s life miserable?” Madhuri complained as she reluctantly got up from the bed to make the *chai*.

Chavan rushed to the bathroom with his khaki uniform. After fifteen minutes, as he was combing his hair, he looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was cut short with some extra length on top. The hair on the sides had started to turn gray. ‘I am just thirty-six, and I am already getting gray hair. It looks like this police duty is going to make me go gray way earlier than I had imagined,’ he thought to himself. He buttoned his police uniform and straightened the three stars on the shoulder. Six years in the police force, he was still fit and far away from getting a cop belly like most other police officers did. Chavan took pride in maintaining his physique and always thought at 5’11” he had an intimidating presence. He wasn’t happy that he was forced to miss his morning exercise. He usually spent 45 minutes to an hour exercising in the house with yoga and weights. He also ran in the mornings when he could. His self-admiration was interrupted by the knock on the bathroom door.

“Your *chai* is ready,” Madhuri said, “and don’t forget *Navratri* (Hindu festival devoted to Goddess Durga) starts from today. I want to do the *Kalashthapana* (installation of holy water vessel symbolizing Goddess Durga) in the morning and pray to our family goddess. If you can come back before ten in the morning, we can do it together. Also, don’t eat anything outside, I am going to fast today but if you get hungry, come home to eat.”

“Okay, madam!”

Vrat (fasting) during *Navratri*, the festival of nine nights where goddess Durga is worshiped in different forms each day was a norm across India. Although Chavan didn’t believe in fasting, he had learned that it wasn’t a good idea to argue with Madhuri. So he treated fasting as a way to break

from standard patterns and cleanse the body.

He quickly moved the comb through his well-groomed mustache, opened the door and glanced at the bedroom. Madhuri was tucked into a warm blanket again. He stepped out of the bedroom and into the passage without making any noise. The passage connected the living room with the kitchen to the other bedroom doors. Their seven-year-old son Adi was sleeping in his room. Chavan walked to the kitchen and sat down at the dining table. As Chavan was sipping the hot cup of *chai* with his favorite Parle G biscuits, the phone rang again.

“What is the situation Kadam?”

“Sahib, it appears that Anil Kokate hanged himself from a tree near Gangamai Ghat using a rope, Gayakwad is here too.”

“Kadam, block access to the crime scene and ask if anyone has seen anything, I am on my way.”

Chavan tied his shoe laces, put his cap on and pulled the front door of the apartment slowly and stepped outside. He walked down the stairs of the building and walked towards his favorite Bullet motorcycle. Sangamner police station had an SUV, Mahindra Scorpio, but Chavan believed riding atop solid cast iron made his stature more imposing. Thirty seconds later, he was riding on the streets of Sangamner listening to the thumping sound of the Bullet.

Chavan was recently promoted to the Inspector rank and was handed the responsibility of the whole town along with eighty-odd police officers. Sangamner had started to slowly wake up as he rode along. Sangamner was a fast growing town in Ahmednagar district that got its name because it was situated on the site of the confluence of three rivers. Pravara River was the biggest of the three and divided the town into two parts. He had just visited the river a few days ago with Madhuri and Adi to visit the Durga temple. Chavan passed overloaded trucks on the highway to reach the old town area known as the *bazaar peth*. Shops that shared walls with each other lined up on both sides of a small two-mile long road. This stretch made up the old town of business and commerce. In most cases, the owners lived in quarters behind the shops, and one could get to the residence using either the small doors next to the store entrances or back doors of the houses. A few shop owners had already started to clean the area of the street in front of their stores and sprinkle it with water to keep the dust down. Street dogs were yawning as the water drops landed on them. Milkmen were carrying gallons of milk on their bikes for morning delivery and roadside *chaimalas* (tea makers) had started lighting up their stoves. Chavan could hear temple priests reciting morning chants as he passed, and it spread a feeling of new energy in the air. It was almost an hour before the sunrise.

‘*Haramkhor!* What a way to ruin a beautiful morning!’ Chavan wasn’t in the best of moods as he uttered his favorite curse word.

Chavan rode through small lanes and got closer to the river. He bowed his head as he crossed the Durga temple to his left.

The Morning Prayer had started in the temple praising the goddess.

“Durge Durgbat Bhari Tujvin Sansari...Anath Nathe Ambe Karuna Vistari”

Chavan took that as the blessing of goddess Durga. He reached the barricades at the entrance of the river bank. The cement pillar barricades were blocking the entrance to the river bank for all vehicles. Chavan rode his Bullet carefully on the edge to circumvent the barriers and got to the stone paved road along the river. The river bed was completely dry, and the naked wells in the river bed only made the landscape look more parched. When the upstream dam gates allowed water to flow through the meandering channel, the picturesque view could make one forget everything. But today wasn't one of those days. Along the river bank, there was a row of ghats or steps leading down to the water. The most famous *ghat* was the Gangamai Ghat, located near the west end of the bank and housed the temple of Goddess Ganga. Just before the entrance to the temple, there was an area along the river that had recently been revamped. Stone tiles on the ground along with few wooden benches for morning walkers were installed in the area. On a typical morning, one would usually find quite a few people doing exercise or chatting under the trees around there. Chavan saw a small crowd gathered around that area, and he figured that was where Kokate's body must be hanging.

As he parked the Bullet, constable Gayakwad came running, *“Namaskar Sahib,”* he said with a salute. Chavan liked Gayakwad from the first day they met. Gayakwad was young and although he lacked experience in police work, his enthusiasm for the work made up for it. He was always eager to take the initiative.

“Namaskar! Where is Kadam?”

“Kadam sir is near the body Sahib.”

Chavan looked at him and started walking towards the crowd; Gayakwad shouted, *“Make way for Sahib, step aside.”*

Chavan recognized some faces in the crowd. They were local businessmen who came for a morning walk to the river. Chavan quickly made his way through. Anil Kokate's lifeless body was hanging by a rope from a thick branch of the tree, and his feet were a couple of feet off the ground. Chavan looked at the corpse, eyes were semi-closed, pupils were fixed and dilated, and about one-third of the tongue was protruding. Suicide seemed very plausible based on his experience. Kokate was wearing a half-sleeved shirt, khakis, and socks. A pair of sneakers was lying on the ground. There was a small plastic step stool near the tree that appeared to have been used in the suicide. The dry river channel was ten steps away from the tree.

Head constable Kadam was making notes. Kadam had thirty years of experience as a police constable in the service and had worked with various

inspectors before. Although he had the cop belly that Chavan disliked, his experience and thorough knowledge of procedures made him a valuable asset.

“Kadam, did anyone touch anything?”

“No Sahib, I made sure of that.”

Chavan took his phone and took pictures of the body and the crime scene. He also took out a small notepad and pen that he always carried along everywhere.

“Who discovered the body?”

“Sahib, the police station received a phone call at 4:45 am, and they called me right away. We don’t know who made the call; I have called the ambulance to pick up the body for a post-mortem.”

“All right Kadam, get two witnesses, get them to sign the panchnama (crime scene report), prepare the application for the post-mortem and inquest. I will sign the form after you are done, take down the body.”

Chavan paused for a minute looking at the body; he carefully looked at the noose and knot of the rope. The knot was at the nape of the neck and ligature mark was traversing obliquely and backward. He took some notes after he was finished, he turned to the crowd. “Agrawalji did you know Kokate? Didn’t he live close to your residence?” Chavan posed the question to Mr. Agrawal. Agrawal was a local businessman who owned two clothing stores in the town. He was a regular among the early morning walkers who came for a morning walk along the river banks. Agrawal was surprised at the sudden ask, but he replied right away.

“Oh yes. He lives in *baazaar peth* too. Sorry! I meant lived”. Agrawal corrected himself and bit his tongue. At the same time, there was a realization that he was now in the limelight. So he decided to make most of the opportunity and made his way to Chavan. “I knew him well, I can’t understand why he would commit suicide, and his business seemed to be doing very well.”

“That is why police is here, others, please move away. Let the cops do their job, Gayakwad, help with the crowd.”

As Gayakwad pushed back the crowd, the noise of gossip from the crowd dampened and made way for slow whispers. Chavan was contemplating whether to make the call or pay visit to the Kokate’s household. He was sure that the news must have traveled through the grapevine all across the town. But he also knew not to expect anything when delivering the bad news. Just then the sound of ambulance broke the silence. Everyone looked back; an ambulance from the local charitable trust was making its way through the back roads. As the ambulance came to a complete stop, Chavan also noticed two people riding a motorcycle towards the crime scene. A young man came running as soon as the bike stopped. The crowd made way for him; he looked at the body and started crying.

“Sahib, he is the son of the deceased, Amol,” Kadam added.

Chavan looked at him; Amol was in his early twenties who had just heard the news about his father. He appeared to be in sort of shocked dismay. Chavan felt sorry for him. The image of his father’s body hanging from the tree was going to stay with him for a long time, Chavan thought. He walked towards Amol, tapped on his shoulder and said in an authoritarian voice.

“I am Inspector Shivaji Chavan, I am leading the investigation. I am sorry for your loss but let me assure you that I will do all I can to find out what exactly happened.” Amol was still in disbelief, tears were rolling down his face, and he couldn’t stop staring at his father’s body. He couldn’t utter a single word.

Two white-clad ambulance technicians helped Kadam take down the body and move the body to the stretcher. As they started pushing the stretcher towards the ambulance, Chavan noticed that the body wasn’t tagged.

“Gayakwad, do I have to remind you to tag the body?”

“No sir, I am doing it now,” Gayakwad replied as he tagged the body.

Amol looked at Chavan and looked towards the ambulance and asked, “Can I go with the ambulance?”

Chavan paused for few seconds and then said, “Yes, but don’t touch anything. Let the police handle this, Gayakwad, go with the ambulance and take him along.”

“Yes, Sahib, let’s go,” the last words were for Amol.

Amol and Gayakwad climbed the ambulance and closed the doors. The ambulance sped off towards the municipal Cottage Hospital.

Chavan decided to visit Kokate’s family, Kadam would have finished his paperwork by then. Agrawal said “Chavan Sahib, I must take leave. It is half past eight now, I must go back and open my businesses.”

“Sure, I will follow up with you if I have more questions.”

“No problem Sahib.”

Kadam forwarded the pad with completed postmortem application for signature. Chavan signed the form and said, “Kadam bag the evidence, drop the application with crime scene report at Cottage Hospital and meet me at the station.”

Kadam took out his handkerchief and bent down to collect the stool and put in a plastic bag. Just then Chavan yelled, “One minute Kadam, keep the stool down.” Kadam looked puzzled, but sensed that Chavan had something going on in his mind; he quietly kept the stool down.

Chavan marked the spot where he found the stool initially. He then used his handkerchief and moved the stool right under the branch from where the body was hanging. The marked spot was about a yard away; he removed his shoes and kept them aside. With a grunt, he pulled himself up and

reached up for the branch from where the body was hanging and kicked the stool. He jumped to the ground and marked where the stool was; it was about a foot closer from the original location. He then kept the stool back under the branch and this time kicked the stool standing on the ground. It landed just beyond the first marked spot.

“Kadam, something is wrong here, for a suicide case, the stool shouldn’t be so far from the body,” Chavan said with his eyebrows raised as he drew and took notes in his notepad. Kadam knew not to interrupt the thought process of his boss.

‘What really happened here Mr. Kokate? What is it you are not telling me?’ Chavan kept on thinking as he nodded his head looking at Kadam and walked towards his Bullet.