

## 16. The Road Block

Silambarasan brought the Mahindra SUV to the front steps and Osman Ali held the door open for Avaran to enter while Venkoji entered from the other rear door. Avaran waved to Safdar Ali and Eleanor as the car accelerated and drove out of the gate. Within a few minutes, the car was speeding down the Vellore-Thoothukudi Highway, heading due south.

Avaran who had dozed off, woke up with a start, realising that the car had taken a curve and braked to a stop. In the headlights, he could see an empty bullock cart minus the bulls had been drawn across the middle of the highway. Avaran recognised the area as a narrow stretch between Kaniyambadi Reserve Forest and Kannamangalam Reserve Forest.

Three rough looking men walked towards the car and took positions on both sides. One each at both the rear doors and one at the driver's door on the front right side. Silambarasan looked at Osman Ali, opened the driver's side door, got out and closed the door behind him. He had barely taken a defensive position when he was attacked. He deflected a blow with his left hand, lifting the assailant's right hand and striking hard with his right fist into the man's armpit. There is a pressure point here that temporarily disables the arm (*Thattu Varmam*). As the would-be aggressor moved back wondering why his arm felt numb, the second unsavoury customer at the rear door on the driver's side reached out and gripped Silambarasan's right arm. In a deft move, with his left hand, Silambarasan applied a *Varmakkalai* pressure point grip (*Thodu Varmam*) between the underside of the wrist and the base of the attacker's right thumb. As soon as the assailant's grip relaxed, Silambarasan drew his hands on both sides of his attacker's head and delivered the "double palm slap" to both temples. This has the effect of disorienting the attacker and even affecting his vision temporarily. An on-the-spot jump and round-house kick completed the defensive action that toppled the assailant over.

The third attacker seeing two of his collaborators disabled, pulled out a long-bladed dagger and moved towards Silambarasan.

Osman Ali climbed out of the other side of the car, grabbed the hand of the hit-man and twisted it until the knife he held fell down. The long-limbed Siddi grabbed his opponent by the throat and the broad green and tan belt around his waist, lifted him and threw him a few feet off the highway.

Silambarasan pulled his bamboo staff out from its sheath beneath the front seat and twirled it around from left to right.

The third man turned and ran. The other two men who had picked themselves up dissolved into the darkness.

Avaran was petrified, although Venkoji seemed unshaken. Both Silambarasan and Osman Ali acted as if nothing unusual had happened. Just as they were getting ready to continue their journey, a pair of headlights shone on them from behind. As the vehicle drew abreast of the Mahindra SUV, Avaran could see that it was a Mahindra Bolero Police car. A middle-aged Sub-Inspector with greying hair and three constables jumped out and came to the car.

"Are you alright, sir?" the Sub-Inspector asked, as the constables moved the bullock cart off the highway.

"Yes, thank you. How did you know?" asked Venkoji.

"We were waiting for your car from the time you left Safdar Ali sahib's house", the Sub-Inspector said. We got a phone call from our Superintendent who was contacted by the SP of Vellore District.

“We have low-tech ‘watch posts’ all along the route. There are shops and houses all along the road where we have people with whom we are in touch on mobile phones. After your car went past the Kaniyambadi Police Station on the highway, and hadn’t reached the Kannamangalam Police Station check-post, also on the Thoothukudi Highway, we deduced that your car may have been stopped. Our mobile team which was standing by left Kaniyambadi immediately.

We will escort you to Anchaneyar Kovil, 6 kms from here. You can then turn left off the highway and carry on to Poosimalaikuppam. Your car will be under surveillance until you reach home. Mobile technology makes life easy for us.

They covered the nine kilometres from Anchaneyar Kovil to Poosimalaikuppam in fifteen minutes. The car drove up to Miller’s Bungalow and dropped Avaran and Osman Ali off.

Venkoji held his hand out and said Good Night to Avaran. “My mother will be relieved to know that we are safe. The car will come for you tomorrow morning at 0800 hrs. Join us for breakfast.”

Avaran’s pulse was still racing. He entered Miller’s Bungalow, walked to the bar and poured himself a large Hennessy Cognac. The nose was vibrant, with fruit, spice and some oak. There was a floral top note and a hint of caramel with roasted nuts and vanilla on the palate.

On impulse, he selected a CD titled “Handel Arias” by Bryn Terfel and selected track No.11 with Handel’s “Where'er you walk”.

This was his way of retreating into the safety and comfort of his childhood. Miss Kingsley at the piano directing the school choir at practice. The angelic sound of boys’ voices singing effortlessly about “Cool gales” and “Trees where you sit” that “Shall crowd into a shade”.

“What a wish, especially in a hot region like Arcot!” thought Avaran.

Avaran recalled that the Aria was from the Musical Drama telling the story of Princess Semele, about seduction, righteous indignation and the “second birth” of her baby, born as Bacchus, the God of wine and ecstasy.

The Perfect Light rituals followed by the adventure on the highway had excited him to the point that he became aware of a mild tremor in his left hand as he picked up and held the Bryn Terfel CD.