



# Officer in Exile



Palanivel drove rapidly down the streets of Ramananpettai, looking neither to the left, nor to the right.

The picturesque shops with sacks of rice and lentils adorning their entrances left him unmoved. The pretty little colonial era homes with their multifarious hues left him cold.

He hated the countryside.

He thought of Chennai, with its chaotic traffic and heat, its thronging temple, and its crowded supermarkets where queuing was an alien concept, with a catch in his throat.

He sighed and eased his jeep onto the mountain road. The mountain of Arasur, with its secret forests and splendid coffee plantations spread out in front of him. He looked at the view with a jaundiced eye, instead wishing he were in some dirty roadside food stall in the city, gulping down idlis and sambar teeming with flavour and germs.

An hour's drive later, Palanivel was halfway up the mountain, surrounded by thick, tropical vegetation. Ramananpettai lay far below, resembling a toy town. The river gleamed as it wound its way through its centre.

The police jeep ate up the miles on the perfect road, and the inspector frowned. How was this remote mountain road of such a superior quality to most of the highways in the country?

Ah, but then the answer came to him. Rajaratnam, the head of the local district, lived in a village halfway up the mountain. Nothing like a powerful politician breathing down your neck to get the Highing Authority clicking into gear.

The inspector occupied himself with such idle thoughts until he reached his destination — Amsur Beans, a small coffee plantation dwarfed by neighbouring rivals. Once he reached a dilapidated farmhouse visible from the main road, he parked the jeep by the side of one of the fields and got out.

He picked up his lathi and made his way a natural pathway of rich earth that separated two long fields populated by neat rows of coffee shrubs. They stretched out for miles uphill until

they hit the dark line of tropical forest. A faint stream of wind whispered across the ethereal landscape as evening set in.

Oblivious to the romance of the scene laid out before him, the inspector made his way towards the derelict farmhouse.

A middle-aged woman was outside, collecting clothes from a wash line. She looked utterly defeated. About her legs, two boys and a girl tumbled around in play, followed by an excitable mongrel puppy. The woman paid them no heed.

Palanivel revised his opinion of her age, given how young her children were. Tough farm life must have aged her prematurely. At that moment, she looked up and saw the police officer. A frightened look came over her face, but it disappeared in an instant.

She said sharply: "Go inside! Now!"

The children obeyed her with surprising alacrity, one of the boys scooping up the little puppy as he ran into the rundown building through a mouldering front door.

"Yes?" the woman asked Palanivel, clearly too exhausted to be deferential or even polite.

"Mrs Faizal Ahmed?"

She looked back at him hopelessly.

"Mrs Ahmed, I heard from witnesses that a moneylender visited your husband two days ago. They report hearing that your husband was beaten."

Here Palanivel paused to consult his notes and then continued: "'Brutally and mercilessly'. The village doctor said he had several broken bones and a bruised eye. His eyesight may not come back fully in that eye."

That was a pause and then the woman said: "Who told you all this, sir?"

"This is something we have heard from several witnesses. And the village doctor."

The woman smiled humorlessly. "The village doctor is a drunkard. And what those people heard is simply my husband and I having an argument."

A silence fell during which the only sound was a moaning of the wind through the coffee bushes.

"An argument," the inspector said flatly.

"Yes. It happens in every marriage. Are you married?"

The inspector stepped forward and said: "Mrs Ahmed – I am only here to help. I want people like you to live without fear of moneylenders. You understand?"

The woman laughed. “You are here to save us? And who exactly are you?”

“I am inspector Arumugam Palanivel,” the inspector said, choosing to take her literally.

“Inspector Arumugam Palanivel, you understand nothing.”

“Assault is a jailable offence,” Palanivel said, taking another step forward. He was now just a yard away from Mrs Ahmed.

“What assault?” she asked with feigned innocence that fell well short of the nonchalance she was presumably trying to assume.

“Mrs Ahmed,” Palanivel said gently. “I am going to go inside.”

In Chennai, he would have needed a warrant. But here, in the back of beyond, who was going to stop him? He brushed past the woman and placed one hand on the door.

An iron grip caught a hold of his right wrist. He turned around and looked at Mrs Ahmed in surprise. She was looking at him with an expression of mingled rage and determination.

“He.... is... just... ill....” she said through gritted teeth.

“Madam, I am trying to help,” Palanivel said, experimentally trying to break her grip. His muscles strained with the effort, but he may as well be trying to push through a brick wall.

She laughed bitterly.

“You can help us by leaving us alone,” she said.

“Listen, Mrs Ahmed. The moneylenders can be stopped. That's why I am here! This region is being squeezed by moneylenders. I can help ease it. It will be for the good of everyone!”

She laughed. “I heard you are here because you got kicked out of your Chennai job for beating two young men. Don't pretend you are some kind of super hero. What the hell do you know about moneylenders? Have you seen the houses they have burnt down, the entire families they have killed, the women they have...”

Palanivel tried moving his arm one last time before deciding to change tack.

“Mrs Ahmed, I grew up in a farm myself. My father was an ambitious man. He borrowed some money to put in place a new irrigation system. It worked. The farm prospered. But what he didn't realise is that we had signed our future away. He...”

“I am not interested in your sob story! Whether it is true or not!” Mrs Ahmed yelled so loudly that the noise of children talking inside the house cut out immediately.

“Mrs Ahmed – you could do some good here,” Inspector Palanivel said gently. “You could help others by letting me in to your nightmare.”

“You bastard,” she said, staring into his eyes.

Then she let go of his hand.



Palaniel looked thoughtfully down at Ahmed Farid. Or what he thought was Ahmed. The man had been beaten so badly he was barely recognisable.

The inspector was used to violence. He himself wielded it when necessary. Yet, this scene was bothering him. It wasn't just the fact that Ahmed had bandages around his head, arms and leg. It wasn't the scars from older wounds on his face and bare chest.

It was the fact that the children were going about their games as though this was normal. It was the way Mrs Ahmed bustled about her tasks in a matter-of fact manner, as her daughter cheerfully brought some water for her incapacitated father to sip through his split lips.

“You... you understand he can't tell you anything?” the woman said after introducing the inspector to her bedridden husband.

“I understand,” Palaniel said. What could Ahmed tell him that he didn't know already, anyway? These farmers were in the hands of moneylenders. The moneylenders charged obscene rates and held the agricultural sector in a vice across the country. There was nothing unusual about Ahmed's situation. The inspector had only needed to see him to verify what he suspected.

“All I need to know from you,” said Palaniel finally. “As if this was the work of moneylenders. You don't have to say anything. Just nod if it is.”

For a long time ,the battered face of Ahmed did not move.

Then he nodded.

“Thank you,” Palaniel said sincerely.

“This isn't a life,” Ahmed groaned. Or at least that's what it sounded like. The voice was distorted by the puffy lips.

“No, it isn't,” the inspector said.

“Is there... is there anything you can do about it?”

The inspector hesitated. He did not like giving false hope.

“I believe so,” he said finally.

The destroyed man beckoned painfully with one crooked finger. Palanivel kneeled in front of him and bent forward.

“It's not for me,” Ahmed rasped. “I won't live many years. The children.”

Palanivel looked at the three children, who were now giggling while kicking a ball between them as the puppy tried to catch it in vain.

“Alright I will do something about it,” the inspector said finally, and his words felt like he was giving an oath. He felt the weight of responsibility descend upon his shoulders.

“Thank you, inspector,” the man said and closed his eyes. Two tears trickled out from his closed lids. “Thank you,” he whispered again.

