**CHAPTER 1**

**INDIA'S HEROES**

"Different people react differently when faced danger. The terrorist attack on the unsuspecting people of Mumbai on 26th November 2008 threw up several brave hearts."

The student fidgeted and shifted in their seats as Mrs Reeta Baruah entered. She gave them a few seconds to settle down, but an air of thrill and enthusiasm prevailed.  
"Lets us begin our lesson for today", she addressed an eager class 8 A. "How many of you are ready with your speeches on what you would like to be when you grow up?"

All forty hands went up in unison. Mrs Baruah beamed .Clearly, this assignment had not been drudge.  
"Wonderful!" Mrs.Baurah said. "Remember that it does not have to be a profession. You can speak of someone whom you'd want to be like --- Maybe a role model or a mentor. You may even talk of a particular trait or quality that you admire in a person and wish to emulate."

A crackle of sheets was heard as students hurriedly arranged the pages on which they had written their assignment. They were eager to speak in front of their classmates.  
It was Ajit Basu's turn first. He spoke of how he wanted to become the best cricketer in the world. Sachin Tendulkar was his idol. He was followed by Gayatri Chhabra who said that she wanted to be a social worker like her mother and Sanjay Damle elaborated on the thrill of flying an airplane, with the air and the clouds as his terrain.

The class listened in rapt attention as one by one the children spoke about actors, sports stars, politicians and so on.

When Kabeer got up to speak, his hands shook slightly and beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. He was not accustomed to facing the entire class and speaking our aloud. He knew well that he did not have flair of making speeches. However, he had worked hard on his assignment and had written it from the depth of his heart. It was different from the others as it did not focus on any one person, profession or quality. It was a combination of traits and people from different walks of life-- people who had stirred Kabeer's heart.

Clearing his throat, he began, "When i grown up, I want to be brave like Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, the thirty-one year old National Security Guard (NSG) commando, who laid down his life fighting the terrorist in Mumbai in November 2008."  
 A hush fell over the class.  
"Sandeep Unnikrishnan had made up his mind, when he was eight in class 3 that he wanted to join the army. When he was older, he severed two tenures with his battalion in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, before becoming part of NSG in January 2007. Major Sandeep was deployed on the 27th November to clear Hotel Taj of terrorists.  
On entering the hotel with his team, he engaged the terrorists in fierce gunfight. When one of his commandos was hit in the exchange of fire, he arranged for his evacuation. Even though he knew that his life was in danger, Major Unnikrishnan chased the terrorists.  
A courageous Sandeep told the rest of the team, "Don't come up, I will handle them." He followed the terrorists who had escaped to another floor of the hotel. The gun fight went on for some time and the Major was hit by their bullets. In a last effort he tried to save his soldier Gajender singh, but eventually succumbed to his injuries."

Kabeer paused. By now, every eye was focused on him. They wondered what would follow. Everyone had been allotted three minutes, and Kabeer had only spoken for a minute yet. Outside, birds chirped, cars honked and younger children were enjoying their recess. However, class 8A, oblivious to everything, was all ears as Kabeer continued, "When I grow up, I want to be like Vishnu Duttarama Zende who was an announcer with the Mumbai railway for ten years. On 26 November, he heard a loud explosion at one end of a CST platform and saw that some people had bloodstains on their clothes. He guessed that something was wrong and used the public announcement system to tell people to go out half an hour, he continued to make announcement even though he knew the terrorists could attack him. They fired a bullet into Vishnu zende's cabin, but it missed him."

"When I grow up, I want to be like Karambir singh Kang the General Manager of the Taj Hotel, who, instead of worrying about his own safety or his family's needs first helped his guests and staff out of the hotel. His wife and children were trapped in a room engulfed by fire. They died of suffocation. Even on hearing of their deaths, he did not abandon his responsibilities, and continued to fight for his guest's safety. The noble and loyal manager, despite his own irreparable loss, still remains at the Taj, helping to restore the heritage structure."

When Kabeer looked up he noticed that Swati's eyes were moist. He suppressed a sob and continued,"When I grow up, I want to be fearless like the Anti-terrorism squad chief Hemant Karkare, who pursued the terrorists in a jeep. He was gunned down by terrorists near Cama Hospital, along with his valiant comrades DIG Ashok Kamte and Vijay Salskar. Hemant Karkare was a brave who served in Austria for seven years in the Research and Analysis Wing of India, as an Intelligence officer. Shaheed Karkare spent his life fighting terror, to make our tomorrow terror-free."

Kabeer now had goosebumps on his arms and Mrs Baruah was looking down. She did not want her students to notice the tears that had welled up in her eyes. Kabeer went on.  
"When I grow up, I want to be caring like Mohammed Taufeeq Sheikh, popularly known as Chottu Chaiwala, a young boy who ran a tea stall outside CST station. He was among the first to help transport the injured to St.George Hospital. Had it not been for the efforts of people like him, many of wounded might not have made it to the Hospital on time."

"When I grow up, I want to be selfless like Sandra Samuel the Indian Nanny saved the life of two-year-old Moshe Holtzberg during the November 2008 Mumbai Terror attacks. Sandra saved Moshe when Nariman house was attacked. Both of Moshe's parents were killed in the attack."

"When I grow up I want to be like caretakers of the kabristans (cemeteries) in Mumbai who refused to allow the dead terrorists to be buried there. They proved by their resolve that terrorism has no religion, and the only true religion in the world is love and respect for all human beings."

As Kabeer slowly ended, the whole class rose as one, applauding and cheering. Mrs Baruah dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes. She knew that all in front of her were children who would become the pillars that would uphold the virtues of peace, tolerance and selflessness in an India that would one day be terror free and lead the world.

Anonymous

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Top of Form