



Nisha Ucchil
Mystery Series

Free Fall

By Kanika G

Free Fall

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Payback Time

"Lady, you must help my friend." Rohan burst in through the door of Nisha's tenth floor apartment. It was almost 10:00 pm on Monday night, and Nisha was already in her lavender pajamas and white nightshirt, planning to retire to bed. It had been a peaceful day. She was in the middle of a riveting mystery, and was eager to get back to her book.

"Calm down, Grasshopper," Nisha said, leading him to the living room sofa. His hair, which had grown below his shoulder blades over the last few months, was an uncombed and unruly mess. Still in his bathroom slippers, he had rushed up the elevator from his home on the third floor of the building.

"Calm down! Lady, I told you my friend is in trouble. Will you help him or not?" Rohan's eyes flashed, as he stood up again, his lanky frame towering over Nisha.

Nisha squinted at him through her rimless rectangular spectacles. "What kind of trouble?" she asked, tucking a couple of stray locks of curly, dark hair behind her ears.

"He is the prime suspect in a murder case," Rohan said, and Nisha gasped. "But it couldn't have been

him, Lady. You must clear his name," Rohan added, pacing up and down past the familiar dining table.

Rohan was one of Nisha's students. A few years ago, Nisha had quit her teaching job at the university to conduct private tuition classes, which not only provided her a tidy income comparable to her previous salary, but also afforded her a lot of flexibility and free time. Nisha had been tutoring Rohan in math every Tuesday afternoon in her dining room for over two years, right through junior college, and now in his first year of degree college. Inspired by Nisha's classes in maths, he had chosen to remain in Xavier's to pursue an undergraduate degree in science, majoring in maths and minoring in physics.

"I ... I must... What are you talking about?" Nisha was baffled.

"Solve the mystery, Lady. Find the real culprit, and exonerate my friend," Rohan elaborated.

"Me? Solve a murder mystery? Are you crazy?" Nisha retorted. "I'm a teacher for heaven's sake, not a detective!"

"Not too long ago, I helped you exonerate someone you cared about. Now you must help me. Asif is innocent. I know it," Rohan declared.

Nisha sighed. She knew she owed Rohan. Around a year ago, he had helped her prove that her maid Reshma was innocent of the theft she had been accused of committing. But this was crazy.

"Rohan, you don't understand. That was a theft. This is murder. It's not the same. I am not a detective. I knew Reshma well, so I was able to eliminate her right away. That allowed me to chip away at the possibilities and solve the puzzle."

"Then do the same this time. So what if it's a murder instead of a theft? It's still a puzzle. You still need to figure out who did it. I assure you it's not my friend. I know him well. So work your magic, chip away at the other suspects, until you land on the correct one. I'll find out whatever you need me to."

Nisha goggled at him. *And how will you do that*, she wanted to shout, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. This silly teenage boy had some ridiculous romantic notions about her investigative skills. Just because she had solved a rather simple puzzle, he thought she could tackle a murder case. What's more, he thought he could assist her. She shook her head in frustration.

"Lady, couldn't you at least try? What's the worst that could happen? You wouldn't solve the case. The police

are investigating, anyway. But you know how they jump to conclusions. Can't you at least try?" he pleaded.

Nisha bit her lips. She had never felt so cornered. She knew she owed it to him to at least try. He had helped her a lot when she had needed him. But why couldn't the stupid boy understand that this was too much for her? She knew nothing of being a detective, except what she had learned from reading Agatha Christie stories. And that was all fiction. In the real world, there were no brilliant and quirky Marples and Poirots. Detective work was slow and fiddly. A murder investigation required vast resources she did not have, and lots depended on luck.

Still, like the boy said, what harm could she do? And just in case she did figure it out, wouldn't that be awesome?

"Okay fine. I'll try. But I am not making any promises." Nisha finally gave in.

"That's all I am asking." Rohan finally calmed down and sat on the sofa next to her.

"Who was murd.." Nisha was interrupted.

"Nisha, who is that?" Rajesh, her husband, who had finished showering and was ready for bed came out in

his pinstripe night suit to see what the commotion was all about. "Rohan, do you have a math emergency? Can't it wait till tomorrow morning?" He groaned.

Nisha looked at her watch. "Has your friend been arrested?" she asked, and Rajesh raised his eyebrows.

"Not yet. But he is their prime suspect, and you of all people should know what the police are like, Lady." Rohan complained.

"It's late now, Rohan. We can discuss this tomorrow morning. You have tomorrow off, right, for Guru Nanak Jayanti?"

Rohan nodded. "But ..."

Nisha interrupted him. "Come here at 10:00, and I'll see what I can do for you." She was firm, so Rohan left grudgingly.

The next morning, as Nisha waited for Rohan, she wondered if she was insane. She had gossiped her way through the previous case. Between her faith in the integrity of her maid Reshma, and her love for gossip, all the information she had needed to solve the previous case had just fallen into her lap. All she had needed to do, was sort through it.

But with a murder case involving complete strangers, how was she supposed to get the required information? Where would she even begin? *Maybe, I won't have to find the actual murderer. Just clearing this Asif, whoever he is, should be good enough for Rohan. I hope he can get me all the information I need to do that. He was quite resourceful last time,* Nisha recalled.

"Bye Nisha. Best of luck with your case." Rajesh blew her a kiss, as he left for his office. Nisha smiled. She had blushed like a little girl the previous night, when she had confessed to Rajesh about agreeing to work on a murder case.

"Just do your best, Nisha. I can see you want to do it. So why not? It'll be an adventure." His eyes had gleamed, infecting her with excitement. He hadn't made fun of her, so maybe it wasn't so insane after all, she had thought.

But that was last night. Now, she felt nervous and silly. "A detective, really? What the hell was I thinking?" she chided herself out loud. Just then the doorbell rang.

Rohan entered, dressed as usual in a T-shirt and track pants. Everything he wore, from his T-shirt to his shoes, including his watch and backpack sported

Adidas logos. Nisha wondered, not for the first time, how the brand inspired so much loyalty in him. She ushered him to the dining table. He seemed calmer than he had been the previous night. His hair, though still unruly, was bunched into a bushy ponytail. A few rebellious strands had escaped the restraint of his black scrunchie.

"Sorry for barging in so late last night," Rohan mumbled abashed, "but I was really worried about my friend."

"Never mind that, Rohan. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me, who was murdered?"

"You know, the neighboring society, the one in which the theft had happened ..." Rohan began, and Nisha nodded. She knew what he meant. Her maid Reshma, had been accused of stealing money from the Desai's who lived in the neighboring housing society consisting of four high-rise buildings, and Rohan had helped her prove Reshma's innocence.

"A woman, Saloni Chaudhari, living on the 38th floor of the B wing was murdered a few days ago."

"What?? You mean the woman who jumped out of her balcony on Saturday?" Nisha was intrigued.

"The police think she was pushed, and they think my friend Asif Mirza did it." Rohan explained, as Reshma brought in two cups of tea and a plate of glucose biscuits.

"Yes, Didi. That's what I heard too, when I was at Desai Madam's house this morning." Reshma chimed in.

"What makes them think she was pushed?" Nisha was perplexed. She had heard the news on Saturday evening from Priya Desai, who after their interactions in the case concerning Reshma, had become a close friend. Priya lived on the 36th floor of the building in question, just two floors below Saloni.

The two neighboring societies had been abuzz with the news, of what everyone at that time had thought was a suicide. The grizzly affair had been the sole subject of gossip that evening. Late in the afternoon, around half past three or so, a body had smashed down onto the rough tiled walkway on the podium level above the parking garages of the posh housing society.

The beautifully landscaped section with lawns, gardens, walkways, a children's play area and a large swimming pool had been cordoned off, while the police had examined the skimpily clad, broken body of a young woman. Someone had taken a picture of

the gruesome scene from their balcony, and posted it on one of the society WhatsApp groups. It had spread like a virus, until everyone in the two neighboring societies had seen it. The photo had even made its way to the local news channel on television.

The woman's skull had been smashed on impact, and blood and grey matter was splattered all over the greyish brown tiles, while her wide open eyes stared at the clear blue sky. Her arms were spread out like wings, Nisha thought, as if she had tried the impossible, in a desperate attempt to stave off death.

Before Rohan could reply, "Is that why she landed on her back?" Nisha whispered, recalling the nightmarish scene.

"Yes. I knew you were smarter than the police, Lady. They did not even consider that until they noticed other clues." Rohan picked up a biscuit and began munching on it absentmindedly.

Reshma looked from Nisha to Rohan. "Of course, Didi is smarter than the police," she remarked before returning to the kitchen, as Nisha failed to suppress a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. The police probably see loads of suicide cases and with bodies in all kinds of

conditions and positions. They would know better than to jump to conclusions. So what are these other clues, and where does your friend come into it all?" Nisha asked.

"I don't know all the details, but when the police examined her house, they deduced that she was probably in the midst of entertaining someone when the incident happened. There was a half drunk glass of wine, and another washed glass on the counter. There was also a plate full of pistachio shells."

"Didn't the police check for prints? If they don't match your friend, it should put him in the clear."

"They did check. They found that the rim and bottom of the plate was wiped clean of prints. The glass top coffee table, and kitchen platform were also wiped clean off prints. That's when they started suspecting foul play."

"I see. That is suspicious. What else do you know? What makes your friend the prime suspect?"

"Something about there being no record of anyone entering her flat. No one shows up on the CCTV camera that is automatically activated when anyone rings the bell. My friend Asif is her neighbor, and has a copy of her apartment key."

"Wait, how old is this friend of yours? How do you know him?"

"Nineteen. He is an engineering student. He grew up here, Lady. They lived on the fifth floor of the C wing in our society for almost ten years. Then three years ago, they moved to the neighboring society. He is one of my best friends. We went to the same school and played basketball and cricket together for years."

"Oh, I know who you're talking about. His family used to run the *biryani* stall at our society Christmas fair," Nisha recalled.

"That's right, Lady. You have a good memory." Rohan's eyes lit up.

"But then, why is he a suspect? The key was probably given to his family, because they live in the neighboring flat. How does that make him a suspect? Did he even know this woman?"

"Saloni gave them the key about a year ago, just a few months after she had moved in. But ..." Rohan hesitated before continuing, "umm ... you see, Asif was having an affair with her." Rohan blurted out, not meeting Nisha's eyes.

"What?? Wasn't the woman in her mid to late twenties?"

"Yes." Rohan nodded.

"Is your friend crazy? What was he doing having an affair with an older woman? He's barely an adult. What did his parents say?"

"Lady, you must help him. His parents did not know about his affair, but it all came out in the investigation. The police figured it out when they went through her text messages and social media accounts. His parents are so angry with him. He is Muslim you know, and having an affair with an older Hindu woman ..." Rohan shook his head, not knowing how to complete the sentence.

"Serves him right, for being so stupid." Nisha chided, as if Rohan himself deserved a scolding for having such an irresponsible friend.

"Lady, he is nineteen, and this really hot chick was hitting on him. He's not made of stone, you know. He's quite a dork when it comes to girls. He can barely talk to them. So when she started flirting with him, he was smitten. He could talk of nothing but her. Poor guy, he had it bad."

"She initiated this relationship?" Nisha was intrigued. She had assumed that the woman was being kind to the boy who had a crush on her.

"Yes. She was generally flirtatious, but she was laying it thick on him. Soon after she had kept her copy of her keys at their house, his parents had invited her to dinner. After that, she would often talk to him in the elevator, complimenting him on his looks or voice. A few times, she asked him over to her house for help with some computer issues. We often teased him about her, but we all thought she was just being friendly. So we were really surprised, when six months ago, she asked him out on a date. They went clubbing, and can you believe it, she splashed the pictures of their date all over her instagram account?"

"What??" Nisha was astonished. "And his parents still did not know about the relationship?"

"Lady, are you on insta?" Rohan rolled his eyes.

"Right. Point taken." Nisha conceded. "But she was flaunting her relationship with him? Wasn't she an actress? I read something about that in the WhatsApp messages."

"She was a TV actress, and was just starting to become popular."

"And she dated your friend?" Nisha goggled.

"Yeah. I was as surprised as you are. Maybe, she just liked talking to him." Rohan shrugged.

Nisha put her fingertips together and rested her chin on them. She stared into a distance, sometimes frowning. Rohan quietly sipped his almost cold tea, knowing she would not like to be disturbed while thinking.

After a few minutes, she nodded. "Is that all you know?" she asked.

"Yes. Asif's parents are too angry to help him, Lady. Things somehow look bad for him, but he could not have done this. He was totally under her spell."

"That's what I don't get. Your friend may have had both means and opportunity, but what could his motive possibly be? Have the police said anything about it?"

"Not that I know, but they are combing through his messages and interrogating him about their relationship." Rohan explained.

"I think it's time I visited my old friend, Head Constable Amy Cherian." Nisha stood up and looked at her watch. "It's only eleven. I think I can manage a quick visit now."

"You have a friend at the police station?" Rohan was impressed.

"Well, not a friend exactly." Nisha winked. "She hates me for proving Reshma's innocence. But she knows me, and maybe, I can coax some details out of her."

Cherian Again

As Nisha parked her car on the street in front of the police station, she noted that the shabby two-story building had deteriorated a little, since she had last been there about a year ago. The white paint was now peeling off the walls in several places. The large black barred iron gates were closed, but a narrow gate on the side was open. Nisha stepped through it and walked past the parked police cars into the building.

The pockmarked Sub Inspector Anil Deshmukh with a prominent black mustache, who occupied the desk opposite the entrance was engrossed in paperwork. *No surprise there*, Nisha smiled, recalling her previous visits to the building. She turned left to approach the desk of Head Constable Amy Cherian, enjoying her usual mid-morning cup of *cutting chai*.

"It's you again." Cherian snorted, as their eyes met.
"What could you possibly want, now?"

"Come on, now. Play nice. Haven't I helped you with a case?"

"Helped! Nonsense! You're only trouble. If it wasn't for you ..." Cherian began, but Nisha interrupted her.

"You would continue beating poor Reshma and never have found the money. Your case would have remained unsolved. With my help, you were able to successfully close the case. I'm sure that was a feather in your cap, and I bet you didn't give me any credit in your report. So one could say, you owe me one."

Nisha looked at Cherian's stubborn countenance and sighed.

"You know, I talked Reshma out of filing a complaint last year, trusting that you had meant well and acted so brutally only under tremendous pressure. However, if that was not the case ..." Nisha let the sentence dangle, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

Cherian gritted her teeth. "Fine. What do you want?" she snarled.

"Much better." Nisha smiled. "I only wanted to know the details of the Saloni Chaudhari case."

"We already know who did that. It was her neighbor Asif Mirza. We will be arresting him this evening, after the paperwork is processed."

"But what do you believe his motive to be?"

"Sex of course. What else?"

"Huh?" Nisha was stunned. "What do you mean sex?"

"Didn't you know they were in a relationship?"
Cherian raised one eyebrow and smiled.

"Yes, I did, but that's no motive for murder."

"Look at the age difference. What do you think he was in it for? She gave him some attention, and it went to his head. Then he demanded sex. She refused, he flew off the handle, and pushed her out of the balcony."

"What utter rubbish! Whoever heard of nonsense like that. You're crazy."

"Crazy, am I? It's not the first time he has acted in rage you know?"

"No?"

"Don't take my word for it. Ask his neighbors."

"I intend to."

"Besides, he was probably drunk." Cherian added, when Nisha sounded skeptical.

"Drunk?" Nisha raised her eyebrows.

"The medical examiner's report on the body said Saloni's blood alcohol level was through the roof. They were drinking together. We found a couple of

empty wine bottles in the room. He probably threw her off the balcony in a drunken rage."

"Did he seem drunk when you questioned him?"

"Not drunk," Cherian conceded, "but we only got to him a couple of hours after she died. His breath did smell of mints, which he could have been using to cover up the smell of alcohol, but he didn't seem drunk. What's this guy to you anyway? Last time you came to help your maid. What's in it for you this time?"

"His friend asked me to help."

"This is murder." Cherian banged her fist on her desk. "You have no experience with such violent crimes. Just because you figured out one theft, doesn't mean you can solve crimes. Take my advice, and leave this to us professionals."

"So what? You can beat a confession out of a kid, like you tried with my maid? You have no evidence, yet you're going to arrest him. I know how things work here."

"We do have evidence. He had a key to the house. That's why he did not activate the door camera. He has no alibi. He says he was at home, alone. His parents

were out at that time. He was in a bizarre relationship with the woman."

"That's all circumstantial evidence, and you know it. None of what you have said is enough for you to arrest him."

"Did you see what the woman was wearing?" Cherian glared at Nisha, as she blushed. "See, even you don't think she would be dressed like that with anyone except her boyfriend." Cherian sneered.

"It's still all circumstantial," Nisha insisted.

"Yes, and that's why I need a confession. No one else could have entered the house without ending up on camera."

"Any one who had knocked, instead of ringing the bell wouldn't have activated the camera. Did you think of that?"

"Of course, I did. Give me some credit. But everyone else living on that floor had a solid alibi. Asif's parents were both at work, the Singhs were out of town on a family vacation, and the Mukherjee couple were at the movies. Anyone else going to her apartment would have been detected on the lift cameras. They were all working perfectly well. It had to be him, because according to the lift cameras, not a soul went to that

floor in the time between when Saloni herself arrived at her apartment, and when she died. You see, it had to be him." Cherian smiled, triumphantly.

"Not if Saloni's guest took the stairs." Nisha pointed out.

"Took the stairs? In a 45-storey building?" Cherian gaped at her in disbelief. Then she banged her fist on the table. "Do you have to always make my life difficult? By that logic, it can be anyone from anywhere."

"Now you are getting the magnitude of the problem. The future of a youngster is at stake. I hardly care for your comfort." Nisha stormed out of the police station.

The Prime Suspect

In the afternoon, Rohan showed up for his math class. "Lady, I don't know what you did, but they haven't arrested Asif, yet. In fact, the police are examining a lot of other possibilities. They are talking to Saloni's colleagues and friends."

"Don't get too excited, Grasshopper. Asif still seems to have the hot seat. I just pointed out to Cherian, that her case against Asif wasn't as airtight as she had imagined. But Asif is very far from being cleared. I have just managed to buy him some time."

"Okay, so what's next?"

"Next, we work on truth tables and logical statements. It's your math class, remember?"

"Lady, how can you expect me to focus on math right now? You yourself said, time is limited. You need all the time you can get to clear Asif before the police arrest him. Can't we work on the case? You could go talk to Asif. He is home alone at the moment."

Nisha pursed her lips and sighed. "Fine, one hour of truth tables, one hour of induction problems and one hour of detective work. We'll go see Asif at 4:00."

"You drive a hard bargain, Lady." Rohan nodded.

"I'm not finished. You will do the extra sums we miss out on from one less hour of work today, for homework and show them to me on Thursday, the day after tomorrow. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Rohan took out his books and pencils and began breaking down logical statements into symbolic language.

Towards the end of an hour, Rohan handed Nisha his work. "I have a question," he ventured.

Nisha raised her eyebrows. "Is it related to logic statements?" she asked, going through his work to check for mistakes.

"Yes." Rohan asserted, and Nisha nodded. "If a person doesn't have a key to a locked door, then they cannot enter without ringing the doorbell. True or false?" Rohan asked.

Nisha laughed. "Fine, I'll give you points for creativity. False, because they could knock on the door."

"If no one was seen on the working elevator camera, the person who knocked must live on that floor. True or false?"

"False, because they could have taken the stairs."

"But why would they? She lived on the 38th floor? Goodness, it's because they wanted to hide their tracks, because they came to kill her. So it was premeditated, not a crime of passion." Rohan whistled.

"Hold your horses, Grasshopper. They are many more possibilities. It could be a person who doesn't like, or fears elevators. Such a person is likely to be an outsider, for anyone with such a phobia would not live in a high-rise. But that person's entry would be recorded by the security guard at the gate, unless he happened to be distracted. Or it could be someone who wanted to hide their visit for some other reason. It could be also be someone who stays just a few floors above or below and often takes the stairs in such cases, or for that matter someone who enjoys the exercise. In these cases, the possibility remains that it was a crime of passion."

"But wouldn't they.."

"Now," Nisha interrupted, "is the time for induction problems, not deductive reasoning." She steered Rohan back to his work and guided him thorough a few problems in proving fascinating identities involving natural numbers using the method of induction.

"Wasn't this that Ramanujan dude's forte?" Rohan asked, as he worked on proving a particularly difficult identity. "A few months ago, I watched the movie about him."

"Yes, it was." Nisha suppressed a giggle, trying to imagine how Ramanujan would have reacted to being called a dude. "*The Man Who Knew Infinity*, you mean," Nisha continued. "Ramanujan would divine the identities, no one knows how, but he did often use induction to prove them. He died early, and over the years, most of his divined identities have been proven, but a few remain unproven to date."

"Wow! Is induction related to inductive reasoning in anyway?"

"It is. Inductive reasoning involves drawing general conclusions from specific cases. According to the inductive principle, if you prove an identity for the natural number one, then you assume it to be true for all natural numbers up to k , and if using that, you can prove it is also true for $k+1$, then it holds true for all natural numbers. The principle of induction provides a rigorous way to generalize from a specific case. Now back to your sums." Nisha pointed at his books.

"Haven't we done enough?" Rohan groaned. "This reasoning stuff sounds so interesting." His eyes lit up.

"Don't you try to schmooze me into forgetting your sums. We can discuss the different approaches to reasoning another time. You still have half an hour of problem solving to do before we get to our detective work." Nisha winked.

"Fine." Rohan slumped down on the table and worked on his sums, surreptitiously glancing at his wrist watch every few minutes.

"It's time. It's time," he declared, when the display blinked 4:00 and packed his stuff at lightning speed.

"I've marked out the problems you need to finish by Thursday. I don't want to hear any excuses. If you don't bring it to me in time, I stop working your case."

"Okay, okay. Can we go to Asif's house now?" Rohan was impatient.

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"Asif, this is my teacher. Remember, I told you how she saved her maid from the police some time ago? I asked her to help you too. Will you answer her questions?" Rohan asked, sitting down on the sofa in the living room of Asif's apartment.

Asif nodded, unable to speak. His eyes were bloodshot. His curly black hair was short, and he had a

small neat mustache, but no real beard. A slight stubble indicated he hadn't bothered to shave for a few days. After opening the door, he had walked straight to the sofa chair in front of the coffee table and slumped down without saying a word to his guests. The coffee table was littered with engineering text books and notes in minuscule curvy and curly writing.

"I am so sorry Asif, about your girlfriend," Nisha ventured.

"No, you're not. You're just saying that, because that's what you're supposed to say. Why should you be sorry? You didn't know her, and you don't know me. So why should you care?"

"Actually, I do know you, Asif. You may not remember this, but some years ago, I was struggling to carry a couple of heavy bags of groceries from my car to the lift. You noticed my predicament and helped me out. I remember, because it was rather unusual for a teenage boy to leave his friends waiting, while he helped a middle aged woman."

Asif looked at Nisha. "Do you think I killed her?" he asked, tears trickling down his cheeks.

"No." Nisha replied without hesitation. "But things look really bad for you. So if I am to help you, I need

you to be honest."

"I don't know how you can help me. The one woman who was sweet to me is dead, and the police think I killed her. My parents are so angry, they can barely look at me, and I am so scared. I don't know how I ended up here. I am not real good with approaching girls. When she first talked to me in the elevator, I was tongue tied."

"Wait a moment," Nisha interrupted. "Rohan said that the first time you met her was when she came over here for dinner, when your parents invited her."

"Yes, but that time all I managed to do was tell her my name. I mean, I'm pretty bad with talking to girls, but in front of my parents, just forget it. I meant the first time I met her alone."

"I see. Go on." Nisha urged. "You were saying you were tongue tied."

"But she didn't give up on me, or make fun of me. She was kind, but not pitying. With time, I started feeling comfortable around her. I liked hanging out with her, especially when we discovered we had similar tastes in music, well more like, she liked a subset of the music I like. Her tastes were more focused. Still, we liked spending time together."

"What about all those dates you went on?"

Asif blushed. "She liked going out and partying. We went out to a few clubs. She's, I mean she was..." Asif hesitated.

"A few months ago, while we were dancing, she was really close. My heart raced, as I felt her breath on my skin. I guess I was a little tipsy too. I couldn't stop myself. When she leaned in, I kissed her," he blurted out, not looking at Nisha or Rohan.

"And later?" Nisha prompted.

Asif stubbornly gazed at his feet as he replied, "After that we cuddled a few times at her house, but without the influence of alcohol, I never found courage to kiss her again, and she did not try either."

"There is no delicate way of saying this, so I am just going to give it to you straight. The police believe that you wanted to have sex with her, but she refused you, and that's why you killed her in a fit of anger."

"I know." The bitterness in Asif's voice was unnerving. "The funny thing is, I never wanted to have sex with her. I'm a virgin, still am, and she must have been so experienced. The very idea would give me the jitters, but cuddling and enjoying the warmth of her affection was magical, just right for me," Asif said

determinedly staring at his toes. "And now, my parents think as poorly of me as the police. Even though they know I did not kill her, they told me I deserve this fate for betraying them."

Nisha gasped. "They are just shocked. Give them some time. They will get over it."

"I am surprised the police haven't already arrested me." Asif brooded. "My parents aren't even here. They just went to work, as if everything is normal. They are so ashamed of me."

"The police are looking into some other possibilities." Nisha informed Asif. "Will you tell me what you were doing that afternoon, and if you had been to her apartment at all the day she was killed?"

"No, I hadn't." Asif was vehement. "I was working through some problems in partial differential equations. They were really tricky, and I wasn't being able to concentrate."

"Why not?"

"Because of the music. She was playing the song *Hallelujah*, on a loop. It was annoying me. It was one of her favorites, I guess, because I have heard it a few times through the common wall between our

apartments, though she never played it when we hung out." He frowned.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I wasn't making any headway with the sums," Asif hesitated. "Um.. so I went to take a nap."

"In the midst of all that noise?" Nisha asked in disbelief.

"I had slept really late the previous night, trying to make sense of the PDEs. So I sandwiched my head between pillows and went to sleep," Asif asserted. "I hoped I'd be better at tackling the PDEs once I was refreshed."

"At what time was this?" Nisha inquired.

"Around 3:00, I guess."

"And you woke up at?" Nisha persisted.

"The police woke me up at 5:30, when they came knocking on my door."

"So you were asleep the whole time, in this apartment?" Nisha bored into his eyes.

"Ye- yes, of course," Asif stammered.

Nisha looked around the room and nodded. "Do you have any idea who might have done this to her?"

"No. I can't imagine anyone wanting to hurt her. She was so laid back and chill."

"Is there anything she confided in you, that could help us figure it out?"

"Not directly." Asif hesitated. "It's just my feeling." Nisha nodded encouragingly, so he continued. "There was some sadness buried deep in her soul, I think, because she mostly liked melancholy music. That's what I meant, when I said her tastes were more focused. If I were to guess, it had something to do with her dad. She was very close to him growing up. Her mother had died from breast cancer when she was seven. But her dad and she had a major fight some years ago, and they barely spoke to each other since."

"Did he ever visit her here?"

"I don't think so. She was very tight lipped about him. But she let slip once, that it tormented her, that angry as he was, in his own way, he also watched out for her."

"That's cryptic."

"I know, but she wouldn't say another word..." Asif was interrupted by loud and incessant banging on his door.

"Who's that?" Rohan asked, startled out of his skin.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Nisha furrowed her eyebrows.

"Do you th.. think it's the p.. po.. olice?" Asif stammered.

"I doubt it." Nisha shook her head. "Just open the door. We're right here." She put a comforting hand on his shoulder and urged him forward.

With trembling fingers, Asif turned the doorknob and found himself facing a tall burly older man, with a face so red with anger, it looked like it might burst.

"She was my sweet angel. How could you, you swine? You deserve to go to hell, you lump of filth. Just because she wouldn't have sex with you, you disgusting, dirty snake. You killed my little baby girl, you monster, devil's spawn ..."

Asif staggered backward, as if he had been physically pushed by the unrelenting force of those words. "I didn't do it," he howled. "I didn't do it. Why won't anyone believe me? I didn't do it," he cried, tears gushing down his cheeks. "She was so nice to me. I

could never hurt her. Why won't anyone believe me?" he screeched, his features contorted with pain. Then he slumped down on the floor, exhausted, crying silent tears.

"You haven't seen the last of me." The angry man spared him one last look of disgust, before stomping away to call the elevator.

Rohan and Nisha exchanged looks of dismay. Nisha went down on her knees and placed a comforting hand on Asif's shoulder. "I can't imagine how difficult this is for you. But I need you to answer a few questions."

"Your parents will be home soon, and we cannot be here when they arrive." Rohan added with a note of urgency in his voice. "Please, just answer her questions. I promise she will do her best to help you."

"She's just an old lady, Rohan, and I am doomed. What can she do to help me?" Asif was despondent.

"She can, and even if she can't, she is trying, Asif. You can't give up. You mustn't. I bet she'll figure something out. Just give her something she can work with."

"Like what? I have no clue what happened. It makes no sense." Asif clenched his fist and gritted his teeth in frustration.

"Didn't she have any colleagues, or rivals at work?" Nisha asked. "Did she ever mention any?"

"She was happy with her work. We hardly ever talked about other people. Usually, we discussed books, music, movies and such. She only ever mentioned two of her colleagues, but only because they live in the building ..."

"They live in the building!" Nisha exclaimed. "Okay Asif, do you know who they are, and which flats they live in?" she asked, sounding all businesslike.

"Umm... I am not really sure, but I can find out. She didn't have any issues with them. Come on Ma'am, don't be melodramatic. Her colleagues couldn't have killed her. Could they?" A sliver of doubt crept into his voice.

"I don't know, but we need to find out." Nisha gave Asif her phone number and stored his. As soon as you get the information, WhatsApp it to me."

"But Lady, on what authority will you question these colleagues? What excuse will you make for going to see them?" Rohan asked, after they left Asif's house.

"I don't know yet." Nisha smiled. "But we'll have to be creative." Her eyes twinkled.

Once back in their own society, Nisha gripped Rohan's arm and pulled him close. "I don't think your friend murdered Saloni, but he is hiding something from us," she whispered. "He was lying about what he was doing that afternoon. See if you can convince him to tell you what really happened that afternoon. I'm not his mother. I don't care if he was surfing porn. This is a murder case, and every bit of incorrect or missing information makes it harder to solve. Also, every lie that he is caught in, makes him more suspicious to the police."

Rohan nodded. "I'll do my best." He sighed. "But how can you be so sure, he was lying, Lady?" he added, furrowing his eyebrows.

"I've taught teens for a very long time, long enough to know when they are lying." Nisha snorted.

Party Planners

Later that evening, Nisha went to see her neighbor Sachi. Sachi held a senior management position at a large media conglomerate and had loads of contacts. She had been Reshma's previous employer and had recommended her to Nisha. The previous year, Sachi had arranged for safe accommodation for Reshma, while Nisha had figured out a way to prove her innocence.

They had become good friends and often enjoyed gossiping over a cup of tea. A few months ago, when Sonia, Sachi's daughter had left to pursue higher studies in Singapore, Sachi had more time on her hands. Both Nisha's children were already grown up and lived abroad, so Sachi and she spent Thursday evenings catching up, swapping recipes or playing cards.

"This is an unexpected surprise." Sachi ushered Nisha in. "Wait, I know that look. I saw it sometime ago. What are you up to?"

"Actually, I have a favor to ask." Nisha looked at her sheepishly.

"Are you working another case?" Sachi's eyes sparkled.

"What? Why would you think that?" Nisha was taken aback.

"Because you don't usually look so uncomfortable asking for a few tomatoes, or to borrow my glue stick. The last time you hesitated so much asking for something, was when you were working Reshma's case. So what is it now?"

Nisha shook her head absorbing all that Sachi had said, and before she could reply Sachi interjected, "It's the suicide case in the next society, isn't it? Are you their detective on call?"

"You should be the detective," Nisha scowled. "All those deductions from my expression, even Poirot couldn't do better."

"But you have such an expressive face." Sachi laughed, urging Nisha to sit down.

"Yes, that is the case." Nisha admitted making herself comfortable on the sofa. "Apparently, there is no such thing as a free lunch." Nisha rolled her eyes. "A student who helped me solve Reshma's case, has come to collect."

"Oh, I didn't know that was an option. I'll keep it in mind this time." She winked, mischievously.

"Oh no! I do keep getting myself deeper in trouble, don't I?" Nisha sighed.

"Not with me, Nish. I'll give you all the free lunches you want, just so long as I don't have to literally cook." She winked. "So tell me, how I can help?"

Nisha informed Sachi of all the progress she had made on the case. "Now I need to interview these people, but I don't know them, and I have no authority to do it. Do you have any ideas? Would you happen to know either of these people through your work?" She looked hopefully at Sachi.

Sachi closed her eyes and rested her chin on her steepled fingers. Nisha waited, looking around the apartment. She noticed a new picture on the mantelpiece. "Hey, isn't that Sonia?" she asked. "She looks like she is having a good time."

Sachi opened her eyes and looked at the photo Nisha was pointing at. "Yeah, she's made quite a few friends, and with her new found freedom, parties are all the rage." Sachi smiled, recalling her own college days. "Hey, that's it! I know how I can help you." Sachi's eyes lit up, and she smiled.

"How?" Nisha asked, infected by her excitement.

"A party of course!"

"What?" Nisha blinked.

"Yeah, I mean I haven't thrown one in a while, but you remember my parties, right?"

"Yeah." Nisha said, trying to keep her expression neutral. She wasn't sure she liked where this was going. She hated parties, and she had always found Sachi's parties quite boring.

"Oh don't try so hard to not look revolted. You'll get a muscle cramp. I know you hated those parties." Sachi laughed.

"You do?" Nisha was more confused than ever.

"Of course, I do. I hated them too. That's why I invited you. Misery likes company." Sachi shrugged.

"Hmm." Nisha made a face. "So why are we doing it again?"

"Because this time, it won't be boring."

"It won't?" Nisha gritted her teeth. "Sachi, can you please get to the point? You're driving me nuts."

"Well, you detective people test everyone's patience all the time, when you present your dramatic solutions. Why can't I have my share of fun?" she quipped. "Fine. My parties were boring, because I invited all kinds of annoying people from the industry for networking. I'm too old to bother with that kind of thing anymore. But I could host one to help youngsters network. The guest list would include the people you want to interview."

"Do you know them? Would they actually come?" Nisha perked up.

"No, I don't know them. But of course, they'd come. I'll invite some journalists they'll give their right hand to be interviewed by. They won't pass up such an opportunity at networking, I assure you."

"Could you make it a party to commemorate Saloni's achievements. It would be natural for you to include her friends on the guest list, and then it would be easier for me to ask questions about her."

"Actually, that's brilliant, Nisha. A journalist on my team had done an exclusive interview with her, after she starred in that popular TV show, so I can ask him to help me set it up."

"But won't it take a while to set it up? I need to talk to them soon and make some progress on this case, or Cherian will arrest Asif."

"I think we can handle her." Sachi snorted, remembering going head to head with Cherian when she was harassing Reshma. "But you're right, we should do this soon. Since it will be in memory of Saloni, it should be quite soon after her death. I have a few contacts, and with their help, I can arrange it quickly, as long as we keep it small. How about Friday evening?"

"Perfect Sachi. Thanks so much." Nisha beamed. "But if it's on a small scale, will her colleagues come?"

"We'll limit the guest list to people who knew her. The journalist involved in the interview and some members from his team, a few minor celebrities she crossed paths with, a couple of producers and her colleagues, should suffice. A focused yet effective guest list will give you all the access you need and prove tempting for ambitious new actors looking for a foot in the door. For a group of that size, we can have the party in our society club house. Or better yet," Sachi's voice rose in excitement, "in her society club house. If you can get Priya to help us out, it would be the perfect location."

"Yes, you're right. I'm sure it can be arranged there. Let me talk to Priya." Nisha fished her phone out of her jeans pocket as it buzzed. "Oh here it is. Asif just sent me the contact details of Saloni's colleagues who live in her building. I'm forwarding them to you," she added swiping and clicking away at her phone.

"Got it!" Sachi confirmed, checking her phone. "I'll call the journalist who interviewed Saloni."

"Thanks so much Sachi. I'd better go home and call Priya, so we can get the ball rolling. We don't have much time."

Nisha returned home and called Priya Desai, asking her if she would book her society club house for a party on Friday evening, in honor of to Saloni, the dead actress. Puzzled as Priya was, noting the urgency in Nisha's tone, she agreed to do it right away. "But how about using the outdoor space adjoining the clubhouse, instead?" Priya suggested. "The weather seems perfect for it."

"Yes that's a good idea," Nisha agreed, and promised to visit her the next morning and explain everything. Minutes later, Nisha's phone beeped to indicate a new WhatsApp notification. Priya had messaged that she

had reserved the open space outside her society's club house for Friday evening. Nisha called Sachi to inform her of the change of plans, and that the venue had been secured. Sachi responded immediately, heartily approving the idea of having the party outdoors. Just as Nisha set the phone down on the dining table and sat down to take a breath, the doorbell rang.

Nisha looked up at the wall clock. *Goodness! It's eight already. That must be Raj*, she thought, getting up to open the door.

"Sorry, I'm late. Traffic was awful this evening..."
Nisha gave him a tight hug and lingered on, not wanting to let go. "Oh, I see. It's been a day like that." He patted her back. "I was wondering why you hadn't called to hound me about being late."

Nisha glared at him. "I'll go warm up the food for dinner." She turned away in a huff.

He reeled her in by her arm, and they smiled at each other. "I'll take a shower, and then you can tell me all about it at dinner."

"So how would you like to go to a party on Friday?" Nisha asked, as she served herself a bowl of steaming *dal*. Raj was already biting into his *roti*.

"A party?" Raj raised his eyebrows. "How far do I have to drive? Can't we just stay home?"

"Oh, you won't have to drive at all. It's in the society next door."

"Awesome. I'm in. What kind of food will there be?"

"Is that all you ever think about? It's a party to commemorate the life of the lady who dropped dead."

"Dropped dead?" Raj raised his eyebrows.

"Fine. That was in bad taste. But I couldn't help it." Nisha failed to suppress a smile.

"It's okay. You don't have to be all politically correct with me. So how is your investigation going? I'm guessing this party is your opportunity to question suspects."

"Aren't you clever?" Nisha quipped. She told Raj everything she had learned about the case.

"My goodness. You've been a busy bee. Rohan, Cherian, Asif, Sachi and a math class all squeezed into a day is amazing, Nish. So what's your gut tell you? Do you think it was Asif?"

"No. At least, not for the motive the police suggest. The poor boy was too intimidated to want to have sex with her. I just don't understand her interest in him. What confuses me even more, is why she was so public about it."

"Maybe, she enjoyed a safe romance." Raj suggested.

"A safe romance? What do you mean?"

"You know, just the closeness, cuddling, talking etc, but without sex. Maybe, she didn't want to be in a sexual relationship. Perhaps she had some traumatic experience."

"You may be onto something there. She was an actress after all. The profession can be brutal for women, and more so for single women. She may have hoped, that people thinking she was in a steady relationship, would ward off unwanted sexual attention, from fans as well as people in the industry. She could have been assaulted too, and so she felt safer with someone like Asif, rather than finding boyfriend her own age."

Nisha mused, as she chewed on her last bit of *roti*.

"What does this Asif guy look like?" Rajesh too had finished eating and was taking his plate to the kitchen sink.

"He's about Rohan's height, but more muscular, has broader shoulders and is a shade darker. He has bushy eyebrows, curly hair and a mustache. Why?" Nisha asked, as Raj and she stacked the empty utensils in the sink.

"Well, if she posted pictures of herself with an intimidating boyfriend, a lot of people might back off." Raj rummaged through the fridge in search of dessert.

"That's a possibility. I'll talk to her colleagues at the party and see what I can find out." Nisha joined Raj next to the fridge door.

"I hope they have some good dessert at the party," Raj closed the fridge, disappointed.

Then he stared as Nisha opened the freezer door.
"Here you go," she chirped handing him a piece of dark chocolate.

The next morning, Nisha arrived at Priya's apartment at 10:00 as promised, but was surprised to see her in a maroon T-shirt and gray track pants. Priya usually favored crisp embroidered cotton *salwar kameezes*.

She invited Nisha to take a seat, and then disappeared into her bedroom. Puzzled by Priya's strange behavior, Nisha plonked herself on a cane rocking chair facing the french window. There were two of them next to each other, but the one closer to the sofa had a squishier cushion and Nisha preferred it. She noticed that the coffee table was laden with freshly baked chocolate chip cookies still warm from the oven, and two steaming cups of coffee. She knew Priya liked her coffee black, so she picked up the one with cream and sipped. Perfect! Priya's cook, Susheela, knew exactly how strong she liked it.

Just then, Priya reappeared accompanied by another woman also in work out clothes. She wore tight fitting Nike track pants and a sports bra. Her midriff was bare, and her straight black hair was tied in a high ponytail that just about reached her shoulders. From her left shoulder hung a Nike gym bag, and she was holding a yoga mat in her right hand. "This is Ankita, my personal trainer." Priya introduced. "And this is Nisha, a friend from the next housing society," she added, pointing at Nisha.

The two shook hands and smiled at each other. "Nisha is here to help plan a tribute to Saloni. We're organizing a get together on Friday evening outside the society clubhouse to give everyone a chance to pay their respects. You should come." Priya suggested.

"Yes. That would be nice. Thank you." Ankita choked up.

"Ankita was Saloni's personal trainer too. Saloni was one of her earliest clients. She helped Ankita build her business."

"Business?" Nisha was puzzled.

"I actually run an agency of personal trainers and nutritionists. We specialize in helping actresses and models stay fit and sexy." Ankita explained, handing Nisha her business card. "Saloni recommended me to many of her colleagues, and that's how I was able to build the business."

"Shape Shifters, very creative." Nisha smiled, looking at the card. "Priya, I can't believe you can afford a personal trainer for celebrities."

"I live in the building, so it's convenient for me to take classes here. I do a few slots for people just wanting to be healthy, instead of brooding over perfect bodies. Frankly, I enjoy these a lot more, so I am happy to do it for a much lower rate."

"Did Saloni brood over wanting a perfect body?" Nisha asked, grabbing the unexpected opportunity.

"No. She enjoyed exercise and flaunting her body. But she never obsessed over it." Ankita glanced at the smart watch on her wrist. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave. I have another client I have to attend to," she mumbled without looking up.

"Ankita, wait!" Nisha called out. "Can I avail of your services at reduced rates too?"

"Sure, let's discuss it later." Ankita smiled. "You can get my personal cell number from Priya. I really have to run."

"Nisha, I'm so sorry. I'll have a quick shower and be with you in ten minutes." Priya rushed back to her bedroom. "Susheela can you please heat up my coffee in the microwave?" She called out to the cook as she left.

As Nisha sipped her coffee and savored the chocolate chip cookies, she pondered on her bit of luck. People often confided in their personal trainers. Ankita must know a lot about Saloni's personal life and could be a valuable resource for her investigation. She decided she would go meet Ankita the next day, under the pretext of employing her services.

When Priya reappeared, her hair was damp, but she was dressed in one of her usual starched cotton *salwar*

kameezes, a pale yellow *lucknowi* with white embroidery. Just seconds before, Susheela had floated in with a cup of reheated black coffee. Priya picked it up. "You greedy pig!" she exclaimed, eying the empty plate of cookies. "Couldn't you at least leave one for me?"

"Huh? Oops, sorry." Nisha blushed. "I was distracted. Besides, you should take it as a compliment. Those cookies were delicious. Did you bake them?"

"I taught Susheela to bake them. I was supposed to eat one as a reward for my exercise," she grumbled.
"Anyway, tell me, why are we hosting a party for a dead semi-celebrity neither of us knew. Are we doing this to help Sachi with something?"

"Actually, Sachi is helping me with the murder investigation."

"What? Who was murdered?" Priya blinked. "You don't mean Saloni, do you?" She stared wide eyed at Nisha who nodded. "Oh my god! Really? There were loads of speculations on the society WhatsApp group, especially because of the pictures of her with Asif, and of course the news channels dramatize everything, but I didn't know what to make of it." She raised her eye brows.

Nisha told her everything she had learned about the case. "Rohan wants me to prove Asif's innocence, and he won't take no for an answer." Nisha sighed.

"Can you do it? Do you really think he is innocent?" Priya seemed skeptical.

"From talking to him, and from what Rohan told me, I think so, but why do you ask? Do you know something about him? Cherian said the boy has a temper, just ask the neighbors. Do you know what she meant by that?"

Priya furrowed her eyebrows for a moment and then smiled. "Let me show you." She picked up her phone and began scrolling through her WhatsApp videos. "Right, this one," she said clicking on a particular video, as she handed her phone to Nisha.

The video showed Asif standing in front of a door with a bucket of water next to him. Nisha surmised he had rung the doorbell, thereby activating the door cam. The nameplate with the flat number on it, indicated it was the door to the flat directly above the one in which Asif lived. Nisha watched curiously, wondering what Asif was upto. The door opened, and Nisha gasped. The video showed Asif pick up the bucket with both hands and fling the water at the person who had opened the door, thus flooding the

entryway. A middle aged woman drenched from head to toe, coughed and sputtered. Nisha's eyes widened in horror as she watched Asif laugh. "I hope you've learned your lesson," he hollered before calling the lift.

"He does have a temper alright," Priya smirked. "What do you think, now?" She raised her eyebrows.

Suspect and Victim

"Idiot! What was he thinking?" Nisha muttered.

"I don't know, but the family drew a lot of flak for it. You know how it is these days. I mean, instead of just being admonished for being an impulsive and temperamental young man, the entire family was shamed and abused on various society WhatsApp groups. It was really bad." Priya's expression was grim.

"You mean because they are Muslim?" Nisha asked.

Priya nodded and shrugged.

"No wonder his parents are so mad at him." Nisha bit her lips. She decided, she absolutely had to help the poor kid, and not just to square things with Rohan. The kid needed someone to believe in him.

Priya's phone suddenly pinged incessantly. As she looked at the messages, her expression soured. She clicked on a link and her eyes widened in horror. She gritted her teeth and handed her phone to Nisha. #JusticeForSaloni; the hashtag flooded the twitter page along with the photos Saloni had posted of herself and Asif. #MuslimsAreMurderers, #LoveJihad

and #ArrestAsif were other recurrent hashtags spattered across the page like bloodstains. "Cherian," Nisha snarled. "How could she do this? She's put his life in danger."

Priya turned the TV on to a popular news channel. "Did Asif Mirza kill our beloved Saloni Chaudhari, the country demands to know," the repulsive news anchor blared, all along salivating at his sky rocketing ratings, Nisha thought, cringing with disgust.

"Oh, puhlease." Priya rolled her eyes. "Just a couple of days ago, he was croaking about Saloni's death serving as a warning to teenage girls who indulge in drugs to be cool. Shove it, asshole!" she grunted and turned off the TV.

Suddenly, Nisha stood up. "I have to go," she blurted out, spinning on her heels. She made a beeline for the door, slipped into her sandals, and rushed out of the apartment.

It was only when she was outside calling the lift, that she realized Priya was with her.

"You're going to see him, right?" Priya asked.

Nisha nodded. "His parents will be at work. I can't imagine what it will be like for him to deal with this all alone."

When Nisha and Priya reached Asif's flat, he stared at them in a daze. "Look, this video has gone viral. I'm doomed." He slumped down on the sofa. Nisha stared at the video of Asif assaulting his neighbor with a bucket of water. *Savage and Murderous! But what else can be expected of Muslims?*, read the tweet accompanying the video.

"Asif, what's the deal with this video? What happened? The police mentioned that they could use it to show you are prone to extreme fits of temper."

"It was a sunny afternoon. My eyes were feeling tired, and I had an awful headache. But I had to finish my engineering drawing assignment that weekend. So I decided to sit in the balcony and do it. There were lots of precise measurements involved, and I had made a few mistakes working on it in the morning for a couple of hours. Somehow, in the sunlight, things were going much faster, and it was so much easier on my eyes. I worked for just an hour in the balcony and was almost done. I was just putting the finishing touches, when dirty water pouring down from the upstairs balcony ruined the drawing. It was due the next day, and accounted for thirty percent of my grade. I was in tears." Asif's expression darkened as he recalled the day.

"So that's why you lost your temper." Nisha sighed.
"Still, this is not going to play out well for you."

"You don't understand. Ammi saw me crying. She asked what had happened. I told her how my project was ruined, and I'd have to start over. She gasped and kept mumbling that she should have told me. You see, I rarely went to the balcony, so I did not know this was a regular phenomenon."

"A regular phenomenon!" Nisha was puzzled. "Didn't your parents report it to the managing committee of the society? They usually sort these things out."

"Ammi had tried, but they told her to first try to resolve the issue with the people upstairs, directly. So Ammi went to tell them. Unfortunately, she went dressed in her *burkha*. The lady there told Ammi to go to Pakistan, if she had problems with her Hindu neighbors, and that Muslims had caused her family enough problems during partition and that it was shameless of Ammi to complain about a little water. She called Ammi some awful names I can't bring myself to repeat, but it made my blood boil, and I did what I did." For the first time, Nisha saw intense pain mingled with hate on Asif's innocent face.

Nisha felt drained. She sat down on the sofa.

"And then you know what happened." He turned to Priya, his voice laced with bitterness.

"Asif, I'm so sorry. I had no idea." Priya said, her cheeks moist with tears. "I thought so poorly of you and your upbringing because of that video. Why didn't your *ammi* report the lady upstairs?"

"Do you think that vile woman is the only person who thinks like that, these days?" Priya had no answer.

"Don't pretend you did not read those WhatsApp posts," Asif's eyes flashed as he continued. "Ammi was scared. She decided it was a small inconvenience to endure, for her peace of mind." He turned to Nisha, and his tone softened. "You know when you came earlier, I was so angry with my parents. But this video reminded me why they were so mad. I never really thought of Saloni's religion. She was friendly and sweet, and that's all I noticed. But now I know, I was being naive, selfish and stupid, and I betrayed my parents. I hope, they at least can forgive me with time."

"Asif," Nisha ruffled his hair. "Your parents are hurt and scared. But believe me when I say, they'll come around. Parents have an immense capacity for forgiveness when it comes to their children, " she smiled. "They are the least of your worries, but if you could tell them what you told me, it would go a long

way towards mitigating their pain. And perhaps you were naive, but it's those trolls who are stupid, not you by a long shot."

Asif closed his eyes and nodded. "Thank you," he said, opening his eyes.

"Nisha and Priya looked at each other. "I'll stay," Priya offered, realizing Nisha did not want him to be alone. But just then, the doorbell rang.

For a moment they all froze, and then their eyes turned to the video feed from the door cam. "Oh thank god," Nisha heaved a sigh of relief and rushed to open the door when she saw Rohan.

"What are you doing here, Lady?" Rohan was stunned.
"Wait, you came here because you were worried about him after seeing the news." Rohan hugged her.
"Thankyou."

"Yes. Can you stay here with him for a sometime?" Nisha asked, trying to free herself from Rohan.

"Yes, I'll stay. But please, just figure out a way to save him."

"I'll do my best." Nisha promised, as Priya and she left. "I have a tuition class this afternoon at two," she told Priya. "Could you please co-ordinate with Sachi

and set up the event? Sachi said she had planners to organize it all. You just have to make sure they have the requisite permissions."

"Sure. I'll take care of it." Priya nodded. She hesitated before adding, "Nisha, I know the family on the 39th floor. That lady and I have been friends for a while. When the incident happened, I sympathized with her, but condemned the hate speech being hurled at the family. She did not say anything about it, and I assumed she was just upset. I mean these are educated people. They seem completely sane. Why would they behave like that? I don't think I can bear to even look at her ever again."

"I don't understand it, either." Nisha shook her head. "There is so much hatred and toxicity everywhere these days."

"I know. But that's not all. I am a very poor judge of character. I befriended this family, and I handed Reshma to the police. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing Priya. Society is changing, and in my opinion, not for the better. Just the other day I was talking to the mother of one of my students. Her younger child is in fourth grade. She was asking me for a recommendation for a good school in the area. She wants to change her daughter's school next year,

because the one she is in right now, has too many Muslim students." Nisha shook her head and sighed.

"Things have changed a lot since we were kids." Priya lamented. "I don't remember thinking much about what religion my friends practiced. We were taught to be sensitive and polite about other people's beliefs. Now ..." She shrugged, unsure about how to complete her thought, but Nisha understood and patted her back. "Is there anything I can do to help with our investigation?" Priya asked.

"Does Abhay happen to know the medical examiner who did Saloni's autopsy?" Nisha inquired about Priya's husband.

"Yes, he does. They have been friends since medical school. Why?"

"Can he find out what the ME determined was the exact time of her death? I don't know how I am going to help Asif, but I am going to need all the information I can get my hands on, which may not be much, because I have no authority to ask anyone any questions."

"I have faith in you, Nisha. You're resourceful and clever. It was amazing, how you exonerated Reshma.

I'll find out about the time of death from Abhay and message it to you by tomorrow night." Priya promised.

By the time Nisha was back home, it was noon. Reshma had served her lunch on a plate and left. Nisha liked her food piping hot, so she put it in the microwave. Just then the doorbell rang. Nisha wasn't expecting anyone. Her puzzled expression changed to utter bewilderment when she opened the door and saw Cherian in full uniform.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Cherian asked, amused. "I wish I had a picture of your expression. I've never seen you so dumbstruck." She laughed. "You keep coming to my office, so this is only fair, isn't it?"

"Of course, please come in." Nisha ushered her in, after recovering from her initial shock. Can I get you something? Tea, coffee?" Nisha offered.

"A glass of cold water, please." Cherian requested, and Nisha went to the kitchen to get some.

When she returned, Cherian was sitting on the sofa looking around the apartment. You don't have any knickknacks, handicrafts, art or souvenirs." Cherian observed.

"I don't like keeping objects that serve no purpose and collect a lot of dust." Nisha said handing Cherian a glass of water with ice cubes.

"Thanks. What about books?" Cherian asked, noting the absence of a bookshelf. "You're a teacher, aren't you?"

"My husband and I switched to e-readers several years ago for fiction and pleasure reading. I keep textbooks and reference material in a cupboard in my bedroom," Nisha replied, wondering why Cherian was stalling. She was finding it difficult to keep her tone even.

"So you are practical and rational. Are you religious too?" Cherian asked.

"No. Why do you ask? Why are you here?" Nisha asked getting increasingly irritated. "How could you leak that video to the media? Have you seen what they've done to the poor boy?" The anger that had been bubbling through her blood, exploded. "If he commits suicide, it'll be on you." Nisha knew she was being dramatic, but she desperately wanted to deliver a stinging blow.

"How dare you? You think I leaked the video to the media? You think I like what they are doing to him?" Cherian was turning red with indignation.

"Don't you? You'll go to any length to close your case and be done with it. I saw what you did to Reshma."

"You know nothing. You sit in your fancy apartment, do some bit of problem solving, get lucky and consider yourself a detective. I have to deal with thieves, rapists and murderers, every day." Cherian snarled. "I have to deal with pressure from politicians, businessmen, media and NGOs. I have to work in the system, and you judge me for it. It's because of pressure from upper middle class people like you, that we have to mistreat the poor. You think we like it? No. But we need our salary, which by the way is a pittance, but we need it to survive. So we have hardened our hearts and learned to live with it."

"What do you mean people like me?" Nisha was outraged.

"I mean people from your socioeconomic class. How do you people treat your maids? Are they allowed in your regular lifts, or do you have a separate untouchables lift for them? Yes, you do, don't you?" Cherian interpreted Nisha's expression accurately. "Maybe not in this building, because there are only two lifts, but you know that's the case in the neighboring society. Madam, we work for you and the richer sections of society hold more power. We simply follow your lead. What did you see on twitter today,

Madam? Are people in your socioeconomic class behaving responsibly?"

"You're right, Head Constable Cherian. We make impossible demands on you, and then judge you and feel superior." Nisha was ashamed.

"Madam, don't get me wrong. As much of a pain in my butt you've been, I know you are one of the good ones. That's why I have come to you, today. Believe me, I did not leak that video. The neighbor he drenched, probably leaked the video for revenge. That he is the prime suspect in the investigation, is not in my power to hide from the media. But like him, I too am from a minority community, and I don't want him to suffer on account of that. However, some new evidence has come to light, and it may make things worse for him. Among Saloni's personal items, we found love letters signed with the initials A. M. The contents of the letters are quite sensual, bordering on erotic. As of now, besides me, only my junior constable Rashmi, who found it, know of this evidence. If I file it in, the media will quickly get a hold of it, and if you think it's bad for him now, wait till the contents of those letters go viral."

"Wait! You mean A. M as in Asif Mirza. You think Asif wrote those letters?"

"Obviously. They are love letters, he was her lover and the initials match."

"But Asif never mentioned any letters. I can't imagine him capable of writing erotic letters."

"It's always the quiet ones, Madam. The letters contain a few Urdu *shayaris*," she said giving Nisha a significant look.

"It's still circumstantial. I doubt he knows any Urdu at all."

"His family might have books, he copied them from."

"But anyone could have copied them from the internet."

"I know Madam, but it looks pretty bad for him," Cherian paused, "especially if he did not send those letters."

"What do you mean?" Nisha was puzzled.

"I mean, someone sent those letters. If it wasn't him, and he somehow came across the letters, he might have killed her in a jealous rage."

"And if he did send the letters, then it strengthens your theory that he wanted to have sex and she might have

refused him, and that made him angry. So either way, this evidence works against him." Nisha nodded, racking her brain for ideas. "Can I see these letters?" she asked suddenly remembering something.

Cherian produced them. Nisha barely glanced at them before saying, "Nope, Asif did not write these letters."

"How can you possibly know that, Madam?" It was Cherian's turn to look puzzled.

"Just yesterday, I saw books and papers lying all over his desk, including an incomplete homework assignment. It was very neatly done, but his handwriting is nothing like this. It is rounded and curly. Not slanted and sharp like this." Nisha perked up. "Also, what you propose could be turned on its head. Whoever wrote these love letters may have been jealous of Asif and killed Saloni in a fit of rage, especially since Saloni flaunted her relationship with Asif. Maybe, this other relationship had to be kept secret for some reason, perhaps because of some complications involved in dating a colleague. By the way, have you talked to her colleagues who lived in the building?" Nisha asked, feeling excited.

"I have, but what you're saying makes no sense. If this other AM guy wanted their relationship to be secret, wouldn't he be happy she flaunted her relationship

with Asif, as it would draw any suspicion away from their secret real relationship?"

"Perhaps he was, but then maybe he thought she was developing real feelings for Asif, and got angry. Yes! That must be it. Who are her colleagues?"

Cherian bit her lip. "Mandira Gopal, who does the supporting role on the TV show that made Saloni popular, lives on the twenty third floor, and Ajit Mathur, who plays the lead actor on another, less popular TV show, lives on the thirtieth floor."

"Ajit Mathur!" Nisha exclaimed. She whipped out her phone to check the contacts Asif had sent her. She hadn't really noted the names before. "Then he could be AM, couldn't he? She was also professionally more successful than him. It must have made him insecure."

Cherian shrugged, unconvinced.

"Climbing eight floors can't be such a big deal for a young man. So he must have gone up the stairs."
Nisha persisted.

"But why? The elevators were working. Besides, he'd show up on the door cam when he rang the doorbell."

"He could have knocked, or had a copy of the key. That would be especially likely, if they were trying to

keep their relationship secret. That's probably why he did not take the elevator," Nisha offered.

"Secret from whom?" Cherian snorted. "The security guard?"

"Of course. These are not ordinary people like you and me. They are TV actors. If one of them was visiting the other regularly, it would spark gossip, not just in the society or office, but in the tabloids."

Cherian burst out laughing. Nisha frowned. "What are you laughing at?" she snapped. To her annoyance, Cherian kept laughing. "What's so funny?" Nisha fumed.

Cherian tried to sober down. "This is so much worse than circumstantial evidence. It's all pure conjecture. But you had me going for a moment. You do have a wild imagination," she said before succumbing to another fit of giggles.

Nisha sighed. "You're right." She nodded, and infected by Cherian's laughter, she joined in. "But you know, it doesn't have to be this way. Talk to these colleagues, and see if you find any evidence to support my wild imagination," Nisha added, turning serious.

"And why should I do that?" Cherian snorted.

"Because you told me you were sympathetic to minority communities. Why are you zeroing in on Asif, when there are other viable suspects? What about Mandira Gopal? Was she Saloni's friend? Maybe she was over there to hang out, and Saloni made her feel bitter or inferior and she acted in a fit of rage. Why does the murder have to be romantically motivated? Doesn't Mandira stand to gain from eliminating professional competition?"

"I will interview them as a part of my job, but if you want to save this kid, now that social media has got involved, you had better hurry up and find something useful, or his life is going to become quite unpleasant, and not because of me. I can't hold this evidence for long, but I can give you a day before it becomes public."

Nisha bit her lip. "Thanks Cherian," she nodded. "Can I take a picture of one of the letters?"

"Be my guest, but don't you dare share it with anyone. Anyone at all, you hear me, or I'd be in big trouble." Cherian bored into Nisha's eyes. "See if you can work any of your magic," she added in a softer tone. "This time, I am rooting for you."

As Cherian approached the door, Nisha suddenly remembered something. "Cherian, why did you tell

Saloni's father your theory, that she refused to have sex with Asif, and that's why he killed her? You don't know that, and you shouldn't ..."'

"I did not!" Cherian was furious. "I came here because I thought you were fundamentally a decent person, and now you accuse me of this? In fact, I haven't even talked to him yet. He has been busy with funeral arrangements and only agreed to come see me later today. All he knows is what's in the media, and I wasn't the one who posted those pictures on social media."

"You didn't tell him?" Nisha gaped. "The why did he come and yell at Asif for killing his daughter, just because she refused to have sex with him?"

"He did?" Cherian's anger evaporated, only to be replaced by bewilderment.

Nisha told Cherian all about Saloni's dad visiting Asif.

Asif had told Nisha that Saloni had stopped talking to her dad after their fall out. Even if he did look out for her indirectly, how would he know that Asif and Saloni had never had sex? Cherian had learned about the strained relationship between Saloni and her dad from other sources and could not fathom how he would know any intimate details about Saloni's sex

life. The two women stared at each other wondering what this could mean.

"I don't know what to make of it, but the way I see it, her dad confirming my theory puts another nail in Asif's coffin," Cherian remarked, before leaving.

Nisha sighed and returned to the microwave. The plate of food was cold. She turned to look at the wall clock. It was just past one. Nisha did not feel like reheating the food. She gulped it down mechanically, a pity too she mused, for Reshma had made her favorite *sambhar chawal* and beans *bhaji* cooked with loads of grated coconut. She rinsed her plate, left it in the sink and picked up the glass of *chhaas* Reshma had left for her in the fridge. She savored the drink setting aside thoughts about the case. Her student Radhika would arrive soon. For a while, she could take comfort in the the fun of teaching and the beauty of physics.

Nisha cleaned out the dining table and set up her books, laptop and calculator. She turned to the page of the textbook where they had stopped the previous week. They had just begun their discussion on spin one systems.

In a few minutes, the doorbell rang, and Nisha let Radhika in. Nisha explained how the rotation of the Stern-Gerlach apparatus affected the probability coefficients of the various eigenstates.

"I still can't wrap my head around these superposition states." Radhika shook her head rapidly and blinked. "I keep trying to think of the superposition states as vectors with components. How can the process of measurement collapse the superposition state into one of the eigenstates? It's mind boggling. Especially, when you think of Schrodinger's simultaneously dead and alive cat. So bizarre."

"Quantum mechanics requires you to set aside your classical intuition. You need to approach it with a clean slate and a willingness to embrace abstraction." Nisha smiled. "It's bizarre and beautiful. Besides, philosophically we are superpositions of good and bad qualities. Depending on the situation, one aspect of our personality dominates. Even terms like good and bad qualities don't make a lot of sense. For example, some may call caution what others call cowardice. Yet in a particular situation, if the outcome of an action is favorable or positive, then the more positive label is applied. Anyway I digress. Let's get back to the Stern Gerlach set ups," Nisha said as she mused, *Poor Asif is simultaneously a suspect and a victim. Will measurement be kind to him, I wonder.*

Interviewing Suspects

After Radhika left, Nisha wondered what she should do. Cherian had given her barely a day. How could she help Asif? There was only one person who might know something useful. She scrolled through her WhatsApp messages from Priya until she found Ankita's contact card and called her.

Nisha introduced herself. "Hi Nisha. I am in the middle of a training session. Can I call you later?" Ankita was panting.

"Actually, when do you expect to be done? Can I come by? I'd like to talk to you in person."

"Sure, stop by the gym of my society in about half an hour. We can figure out a program that will suit you well. If you're interested in strength training, I'd like to get some idea of your current capacity. See you soon." Ankita said, and hung up.

Nisha was startled. She had shown an interest in the classes in order to get a chance to talk to Ankita. She hadn't expected things to move so quickly and spiral out of her control. *What now*, she wondered.

She thought about her old friend Ritu, who had regained her perfect figure in half a year, and now she was learning self defense. Priya too was working with a trainer. If she was being honest with herself, she had put on a couple of kilos over the last year. So getting a trainer wasn't the worst idea. If Ankita would do it for reasonable rates, what was the harm? Besides, she could always quit after a month or so, if she didn't like it. In the mean time, it would give her excellent access to Ankita. Recovering from the shock of the unexpected twist of events, Nisha decided things could not have been better.

When Nisha arrived at the gym in her neighboring society, Ankita was just finishing up. "Hello, Nisha. I'll be there with you in a moment," Ankita said wiping down the handle bars of a treadmill, after having sprayed it with a disinfectant.

The gym was well equipped with three treadmills, two elliptical machines and two stationary cycles that faced the glass wall looking onto the large outdoor swimming pool. Several weight lifting machines dedicated to different muscles like quadriceps, hamstrings and triceps occupied one side of the room behind the cardio machines. A sweaty man in a singlet and shorts grunted as he worked on the machine for hamstrings. The space on the opposite side of the room, along the wall lined with mirrors was devoted

to free weights, where a young woman was bench pressing a barbell with impressively heavy weight plates. The man and the woman, both in their late twenties, finished their workout a couple of minutes later and then approached Ankita. "This is Ajit," Ankita said pointing at the man, "and this is Mandira," she added pointing at the woman. "Nisha from the next society may be my next client. She is also arranging a tribute to Saloni," she explained in response to their puzzled expressions.

"Oh, do you work for Prime Time Media?" Ajit asked, his face lighting up. "I just received an invitation from a journalist from PTM who had interviewed me last year."

"No," Nisha shook her head, thinking Sachi and the journalist on her team had been quick. "Sachi, my neighbor, works with Prime Time Media. I am just helping her plan the event. We've been friends for a long time."

"You actually know Sachi Mehra? The journalist Sachi Mehra?" Mandira blurted out. "She's a legend. Why did she stop field reporting? She was awesome!"

"Yes, I remember." Nisha smiled. "She still does some high profile interviews, but she's more focused on writing these days. Her debut book, *The Tribal People*

of Mumbai, was a huge success. Now she travels a lot throughout India to study the traditions, rituals and lifestyle of various secluded communities."

"She's so well connected. I wish I could meet her." Ajit remarked.

"I could introduce the two of you to her at Saloni's tribute party," Nisha offered.

"Oh that would be awesome!" Ajit jumped for joy.

"Thanks so much." Mandira beamed.

"Sure, but I want something in return." Nisha interrupted their elation.

"What?" they chorused, warily.

"Oh look at you!" Nisha laughed. "One would think I was asking for your first born. Relax, I just want some help with making a poster for the party with some pictures and quotes from Saloni that might be appropriate. Could the two of you come over at 10:00 tomorrow morning?"

"Sure," Ajit agreed.

"Sorry, I have a shoot early tomorrow morning, but I can come by around 11:00," Mandira said.

"I can't come that late," Ajit objected.

"No issues. Ajit you come at 10:00 and Mandira, you come at 11:00. That way, I can learn a little about Saloni from each of you for the poster. Please bring some photos of yourselves with Saloni too, if you can. I'll tell Sachi how much you helped me." Nisha beamed.

Ankita, who had been putting away some scattered weights during this exchange, cleared her throat. "I'm so sorry Ankita," Nisha apologized. "I must discuss my workout schedule with Ankita now," Nisha said turning to Ajit and Mandira. "I will see you tomorrow." They shook hands with her, and left.

"Since I live here, I have an arrangement with the society, so I can conduct my training sessions here. But the society charges a small fee for outsiders who come for the class." Ankita explained, and Nisha nodded. "So before we begin, I need to know if you have any health problems like hypertension, diabetes, cholesterol, chronic conditions, any bone and joint problems, etc." Ankita pulled out a form from her gym bag and handed it to Nisha.

"Wow! This seems serious." Nisha was taken aback. "I feel like I am in a hospital."

"I take matters of health very seriously." Ankita said, without the trace of a smile. "How can I assist you effectively without understanding your body? Each of us are different, and what is good for some, may be dangerous for others. I need to know the safe limits for you pushing yourself when you exercise. I'd also like to know what you hope to achieve, like do you want to just improve your energy levels and reflexes, or are interested in strength training? I usually start with the absolute basics, posture and balance improvement exercises along with light cardio. Then I work with the client to help them achieve their personal goals."

"I see you are thorough. As a teacher myself, I really appreciate your methods. I will fill this form and get back to you." Nisha wondered how to broach the subject of Saloni, though she was actually looking forward to beginning training as well. "I hope I will see you at the tribute party on the day after tomorrow." Nisha ventured, as Ankita packed up her gym bag.

"Yes, thank you so much inviting me. I mean, I know this is just some publicity thing your friend's media company is doing, but I really appreciate this opportunity to celebrate her life. It happened so suddenly. I just can't believe she is gone. I don't understand any of it. I mean she worked so hard on staying healthy. How could this happen to her? Life can be so cruel." Ankita brooded.

"You two were close, weren't you?" Nisha asked, as they left the gym.

"Not so much personally, since we both got busy with our work. I usually met her only for training sessions. But we had been friends, and she helped me start this business. I owe her a lot. I wish we had spent more time together. It always seemed like we had forever." A tear ran down her cheek. "You know, this is where her broken body lay." Ankita pointed to the tiled walkway veering off to their left. "Right in front of my house too," she added in a whisper.

"Whatever do you mean?" Nisha was startled.

"I live right there." Ankita pointed to the window of the apartment on the podium level, adjoining the walkway.

Nisha gasped. "My dear, this must give you nightmares." Nisha hugged her.

Ankita broke into sobs as she clung onto Nisha for support and warmth. "I'm sorry for laying this on you. You don't even know me." Ankita felt embarrassed as she recovered.

"That's alright, little one. Don't you worry. I'll make you some tea. Do tell me about her. She seems to have been a kind and loving friend."

Nisha found a kettle on the stove top and put some water to boil, as Ankita sat on the sofa collecting herself. "Would you consider writing a small verse or paragraph about her, or share a fond memory or anecdote? It might help you find closure." Nisha suggested. "It would be beautiful to have you and some other of her friends write personal messages by hand."

"Yes, I would like that." Ankita smiled through her tears. As the kettle whistled, she went to the kitchen cabinet and pulled out two ceramic cups and a box of tea bags. "I like mine black. How about you?" she asked Nisha.

"I'm good with black. Why don't you go wash your face? I'll get this ready, and bring it to the coffee table." Nisha urged.

"Thanks." Ankita nodded.

Ankita's living room had a squishy couch and several poufs around a cane coffee table covered with a white lace table cloth. The room was set up in cheerful colors of pale yellow, and white to evoke the warmth and cheer of a sunny day in spring. They sat and sipped their tea in silence for a few minutes, as Nisha noted that Ankita's sadness and gloom bore a stark

contrast to her surroundings. "May I ask if you know anything about Asif?" Nisha inquired.

"You mean, her boyfriend? He seemed nice from what she said about him. Do the police really suspect him of murder?" she looked up, and Nisha nodded. "But why? He is just a kid, and so naive at that. He could not have hurt her." She sounded vehement. "In fact, I can't imagine anyone wanting to kill Saloni. I can't imagine her committing suicide. I don't understand any of it. It all seems so random and bizarre, like nothing in life has any meaning." She looked at Nisha, as if asking for an explanation.

"Perhaps, it doesn't," Nisha mumbled. "Were you home?" she asked, wondering what it must have been like for Ankita to hear the crash, come running, and then see her friend's crushed and lifeless body.

"Huh?" Ankita had a distant look in her eyes. "Oh no. I was out shopping that afternoon. But when I got back, her body was lying there outside my window. I didn't know why people had congregated there. I came out and peered through the crowd and police to see what the commotion was about. I simply couldn't believe what I saw." Ankita covered her face in anguish.

Nisha gave her a hug and waited for her to recover.
"Do you know if she was seeing anyone else?" Nisha asked tentatively, as Ankita took a sip of her tea.

"What?" Ankita asked. She seemed distraught and looked at Nisha in confusion.

"Asif says they never had sex. So I was wondering if she was involved in a sexual relationship with anyone. Perhaps, some colleague. Perhaps, they were keeping it secret for some reason."

"A colleague?" Ankita frowned. "That seems unlikely. Ajit and Mandira were closest to her. They all have the same agent, and he knows a real estate dealer who rents out a lot of flats in this building. Her agent got us all a good deal, well actually the three of them, but Saloni asked him to help me out too, so their training schedules would have more flexibility."

"Ajit and she didn't have a relationship, then?" Nisha pressed on.

"Not that I know of. Ajit flirted with her when they first met, and he came on strong. I guess, she didn't respond to him that way. So he gave up. But why are you asking me all this? How do you even know Asif?" Ankita was suddenly suspicious.

"I have seen him growing up. Before his family moved here three years ago, they lived in the building adjoining mine in the neighboring society. When I heard the police were accusing him of murder, I was concerned." Nisha said, deciding to stick to the truth as best she could. "I am worried about him. His parents are so angry with him. Thankfully, they don't frequent social media."

"But why do the police think it was him?" Ankita asked, sounding disturbed.

"They always suspect the boyfriend." Nisha shrugged. "Besides, he lived on the same floor, and elevator footage doesn't show anyone else coming in. They know she was with someone, because the place was wiped clean of prints. I think the clothes she was wearing at the time of her death have also convinced the police that she could have been with none other than her boyfriend."

"Her clothes." Ankita repeated, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish, as an expression of horror clouded her face.

"What about them? Nisha asked, feeling alarmed.

"No, it's just ..." Ankita stopped, but Nisha waited patiently for her to continue. "I remembered the

moment I saw her body." She shook her head, as if trying to dispel the disturbing image. "She had got those clothes only recently. She had decided to use them for working out, because she liked admiring her own body in the mirror. It motivated her to keep fit and toned up."

"I see. Do you think she could have been working out when the person who killed her came in? Would she open the door dressed like that?" Nisha asked, her mind working fast.

"Could be, if she was sweaty and did not want to change, I guess. Especially, if she wanted to return to working out."

"Working out. Hmm." Nisha steepled her fingers and stared at nothing in particular, as her brain did some rapid thinking. So many possibilities cropped up.
"Would she work out by herself? Doesn't she do that with you?"

"For the most part, yes, but she had an elliptical machine at home, and preferred to do cardio on her own time. With me, she worked on flexibility and weightlifting."

"Did she listen to music while working out?" Nisha asked.

Ankita nodded. "I had made her a playlist of upbeat songs. It helped her ramp up her pace, especially while doing cardio."

"Oh that's nice. Can you send me the playlist too. Upbeat music might make those stationary cycles more bearable."

"Sure. I send it to all my clients." Ankita nodded.

"Thanks. By the way, do you know her dad?"

"I have seen him a few times. They fell out around a year after I started training her. Until then, I trained her in her dad's house."

"He too seems convinced that Asif killed her, because she refused to have sex with him. How would he know that Asif and Saloni never had sex? I mean, Saloni and he were not on talking terms, right?"

"Uncle was here?" Ankita looked like she had seen a ghost.

"If you are referring to Saloni's dad, then yes. He came and yelled at Asif. Do you know if they had resumed contact?"

"No." Ankita shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't understand. He must have seen it in the news, or on

social media."

"Yes, but all they reported were the social media pictures Saloni herself had shared, not the details of their sex life. In fact, it was just something a police woman suspected. Even she did not have proof, so she did not report it. Asif confirmed it, but Saloni's dad couldn't possibly know." Nisha explained, as a troubled expression crossed Ankita's face.

"I don't know." Ankita frowned.

"It's okay. Don't worry." Nisha patted her back. "I hope doing a write up for the poster brings back some fond memories and helps you feel better. Call me old fashioned, but I favor the personal touch of handwritten messages."

"I think Saloni would have liked it too." Ankita smiled. "Thank so much for being patient with me."

"Oh, it's nothing." Nisha felt sorry for Ankita. "If you need someone to talk to, don't hesitate to call." Nisha added, squeezing her hand. Ankita stared at her in confusion, so Nisha clarified. "I know you don't know me. But I am an old woman with time on my hands. I am happy to listen, and I think sometimes, it is easier to talk to strangers than friends. Much less emotional

baggage involved." Nisha smiled, pressed Ankita's hand and left.

Nisha had barely returned home, when her doorbell rang. It was still a little early for Raj to be back, she noted as she opened the door. "Oh, it's you. I should have known. How is Asif doing?" Nisha ushered Rohan into her living room.

"Lady, have you made any progress? He is really scared." Rohan bit his lips. "Things are getting worse on social media too."

"Have you been able to find out what Asif was lying about?" Nisha asked. "I must know, or things may not make any sense."

Rohan sighed and shook his head. "He became very defensive when I asked him about it. I tried, but it seemed to make matters worse. I wanted him to calm down, so I did not badger him. He is so distraught."

"It's a pity." Nisha bit her lips. "I could have really used that information, but we can't upset him too much. He must be in a very precarious state of mind. Yes, Rohan, I think you did well. Do try to keep him calm."

Nisha told Rohan everything Cherian had told her. He gaped. "No way he wrote those letters. Asif just couldn't." Rohan asserted. He looked at the photo of the letter Nisha showed him. "Nope, that's not even his handwriting."

"Perhaps, but if he did not, then the police have a more convincing motive for him; jealousy."

Rohan gasped. "Goodness! That's really bad. What do we do?"

"Cherian has promised to hold on to the evidence till tomorrow afternoon, but after that it is out of her hands. So you need to talk to Asif, and ask him if he wrote them. If not, then ask him if he can shed any light on it. Convince him he needs to be honest with us. That's the only way we can help him."

Rohan nodded looking pensive. "Grasshopper, you can do this. I have faith in you." Nisha reassured him.

He sighed. "I'll let you know as soon as I have any information," he promised before leaving.

"Come and meet me at noon, tomorrow. I have some errands for you. You asked me to take this case, so you had better be helpful."

"Whatever you need, Lady." Rohan promised, before leaving.

That night, as Nisha and Rajesh chatted before bed, she told him everything she had learned about the case. "Isn't it weird that all Saloni's love connections had initials AM?" she asked.

"How are you so sure that those letters are not from Asif? I mean Occam's razor does point to him. Besides, he might have disguised his handwriting to hide it from his parents, or for some other reason."

"Occam's razor," Nisha smiled, "I actually like that. The simplest explanation is usually the right one. But Asif is just too shy to write like that. I mean, I know in such matters, appearances can be quite deceptive." Nisha bit her lip. "That's why I've asked Rohan to talk to him. Maybe, it will turn out to be Asif, but my gut tells me it isn't."

"Maybe, your gut is right, but that doesn't mean it's a co-incidence." Raj rubbed his chin.

"Huh? You lost me." Nisha waited for him to explain.

"I still think, it all comes back to why she chose Asif for a boyfriend. I mean, they may have eventually

liked each other, but why pursue him to start with? They had nothing in common. They lived in different worlds. Their paths barely crossed. I think answering that question will help you see the situation more clearly."

"Good God! You're absolutely right!"

"I am?" Raj frowned. "Of course, I am." He added clearing his throat. "So why don't you tell me why I am right." He smiled.

"You said it yourself, Occam's razor." Nisha's eyes gleamed. "If we assume that Asif did not write those letters, then Saloni must have chosen him to help hide the existence of her secret lover AM. In fact, Asif said the only thing he had said to Saloni, before she started courting him, was his name! Her lover must have given her other items around the house signed with his initials. But most people would just assume they were from Asif Mirza, AM. That way, she could enjoy the gifts from her secret lover in plain sight. That would also explain why she flaunted Asif on social media." Nisha hugged Raj. "Thanks, Honey. You always brush away the clutter and help me think clearly."

"Anytime, Dear. Who doesn't like being the Hastings in a Poirot book?" Raj rolled his eyes. "So who is the secret AM?" he asked.

"I guess it would have to be Ajit Mathur, her colleague. I am interviewing him tomorrow. Let's see what I can find out. I wonder what reason she had to hide that relationship though. Even Ankita seemed skeptical about the possibility."

The next morning, a few minutes before 10:00, Nisha placed a plate of brownies and a couple of empty cups on her coffee table. Raj had already left for his office, and Reshma was preparing lunch in the kitchen. Nisha set the electric kettle to boil and settled down on the sofa to read the newspaper. She had barely finished the headline, when the doorbell rang. *He's punctual*, Nisha thought, pleasantly surprised. Setting aside the newspaper on the end table next to the sofa, she went to open the door.

A couple of inches taller than Nisha, clean shaven, fair skinned, with short neatly combed straight dark hair, Ajit stood in front of her dressed in jeans and a short sleeved white shirt. He made a startlingly different impression from when he was dressed in sweaty shorts and a singlet the previous day.

"Come in." Nisha smiled, ushering him to the sofa. "You clean up nice," she added, her eyes twinkling.

"It's not nice of you to tease me so. I could hardly retaliate in kind." Ajit winked.

"Advantages of being an old lady. We can get away with being a tad obnoxious." Nisha shrugged.

"Yes Ma'am." Ajit saluted.

"Ma'am?" Nisha was crestfallen. "Fine. I'll play nice," she conceded and Ajit smiled. "Help yourself to some brownies." She handed him a small plate as she made two cups of instant coffee. Let's get to work. Tell me, what Saloni was like."

Ajit munched his brownie. "These are delicious." He smacked his lips and paused to think. "Let's see. She was kind and nice, but reserved."

"Why do you say that? She had quite a social media presence." Nisha sipped her coffee.

"No, I mean personally, so it was difficult to know her at a deeper level."

"Ankita mentioned you flirted with her. Did you pull back because she seemed cold?"

"Not at all. She was always warm and friendly, just not the confiding type. But the reason I pulled back was that I was told to, by my agent."

"Huh? How is it any of his business?" Nisha was puzzled.

"Don't ask me, but he said she was off limits."

"Is that because he represented both of you, and if things went sour between you, he might be forced to drop one of you?" Nisha hypothesized.

Ajit laughed. "No, you're no too familiar with my line of work, are you?"

Nisha shrugged. "How much do you know of quantum mechanics?"

"Touche." Ajit smiled. "Well, sleeping around, flirting, casual sex is all common in our world. Like it or not, it's worse for women, for they are often pressured into sexual relationships to advance their careers.

Typically, when a young woman is off limits, it's because she is in a secret, and often illicit relationship with an industry bigwig."

"So are you saying people in the industry were ordered not to date her?"

"Yes."

"Did you try to pursue the relationship in secret?" Nisha asked, wondering if she was finally getting

somewhere.

"She was nice, but not worth my career. Besides, she didn't seem interested, so why would I even try?"

Nisha nodded. Ajit seemed very calm and rational. Was this an act, or just his nature, Nisha wondered. "You're an unusually sensible young man," she remarked, approvingly. "What would you say was Saloni's best feature?" she asked.

"Her smile," Ajit replied without hesitation. "It would make you wonder why on earth everybody wasn't happy. She made it look so easy."

"To be happy you mean?" Nisha asked.

"Yeah. She made it seem like all you had to do was smile, and the rest would automatically follow," he reminisced. "I think that's why she did so well on TV. The emotions she projected on screen were genuine. She always worked upto them by focusing of various events in her life. But smiles were always easy for her. I once asked her why, and she said it was because Pandora did not let despair out of the jar, so in spite of the evils we experience, we can still hope, and that's reason enough to smile."

"And what did she hope for?"

"I don't know, but it must have been something, because sometimes her smile dazzled, like she could almost reach it. I hope whoever she was in love with, made her happy."

"Do you mean Asif?" Nisha was puzzled.

"That boy? No. She liked him, but not that way."

"How do you know?"

"Have you seen those pictures on social media? Just look at her smile and you'll know."

"So when did you see her dazzling smile?" Nisha raised her eyebrows and waited. *How will you wiggle out now*, she thought.

"Go to her home. You'll see it in one of the photographs on her mantelpiece. Whoever took that photo, had her heart."

Nisha bored into his eyes in an effort to figure out if he was being honest. *He's too clever, slippery as an eel*, she thought. The trouble with Ajit was that he was rational, too rational. If he reasoned that a lie was necessary, he might not feel the least bit guilty about it. "What, in your opinion, was her most annoying quirk?" she asked.

"She very rarely got drunk, but being drunk made her incredibly stupid."

"Really?" Nisha perked up. "In what way? Give me an example."

"Why?" Ajit looked disgusted. "This is not appropriate for a eulogy."

"Perhaps not. But I think you are judging her harshly. The parts of ourselves we suppress, dash to the surface when our inhibitions are compromised by alcohol. Like wild horses escaping confinement, they come on strong, but that doesn't mean they are not beautiful beneath the madness."

"Fine! She would become reckless, or make a spectacle of herself, act slutty, almost as if she loathed herself. It was jarring. How can someone so beautiful, also be so ugly?" Ajit asked, looking like a little child trying to unravel one of the mysteries of the universe.

"When did you see her drunk?"

"Our shooting schedules often overlapped, so I saw her drunk at the studio, a couple of times. Both times, it was after she shot a sex scene. She could not shoot them without a couple of pegs. I get that. But after she was done, both times she got very drunk. If she had vomited, she would have been less disgusting." His

voice was hardened by such unnatural bitterness, that sent a shiver down Nisha's spine.

"Loads of people are annoying when they are drunk. Why does this bother you so much?" Nisha asked, puzzled.

"Because, the first of those times, she tried to seduce me. I'm no prude, and I have nothing against casual sex or a one time thing. Sometimes, it opens a door and sometimes, there's nothing more to it. There's only one way to find out. But not like that, not when she hated herself. I couldn't. After that, our agent didn't have to stop me. I wouldn't even want it. Thankfully, I don't think she remembered the incident when she recovered, and I never brought it up. Since then, we were just friends."

"I'm sorry I stirred such bitter feelings. You were right. Her eulogy has no place for this, may her soul rest in peace. We must learn from her to hope, and fight off our inner demons, so we can find joy, as she always did when her strength was not impaired by alcohol. Perhaps, you could write a fitting tribute, Ajit. I can think of no one better. Would you please write it by hand and send it to me. I'd like to include it in the poster I am making."

"Did you say by hand?" Ajit stared.

"Yes, it adds a personal touch, don't you think? Scan it, or take a picture and send it to me by tonight, if you don't mind. I need to get it printed tomorrow morning."

"Yes, of course, I'll send it." Ajit looked at his watch.
"Is there anything else you need from me?"

"Perhaps a photo of you and her." Seeing his uncomfortable expression she added, "Even as a part of a group would be okay."

Ajit smiled. "Will do." He was just about to leave, when the doorbell rang.

As Ajit walked out, Mandira entered. "Would you like tea or coffee?" Nisha asked.

"Coffee please. Thank you." Mandira beamed, her young face bubbling with eagerness. Nisha estimated she was in her mid twenties. Her straight black short bob cut hair was pushed back with a broad navy blue cloth hairband, and she wore a matching navy blue top and beige capris.

"Sure." Nisha smiled, infected by her ebullience.
"Here, take a brownie," she offered.

"Thanks," Mandira said biting into the chocolaty goodness with an expression of pure bliss. "So how do we proceed?" she added, having thoroughly enjoyed the confection. Nisha couldn't help feeling amused.

"You worked with Saloni, right?" Mandira nodded.
"What can you tell me about her?" Nisha asked.

"Well, she was fun loving and easygoing. I can't believe someone murdered her on the happiest day of her life." Mandira's expression turned sombre as she shook her head.

"Happiest day of her life? Whatever do you mean?" Nisha was intrigued.

"We were working on the set, when she got the news by email. She had auditioned for the role of Kalpana Chawla in an upcoming biopic, and she desperately wanted it. She had been talking about it for weeks. The email confirmed that she had been chosen for the role. We were all so excited, we wanted to take her out for lunch to celebrate. But she seemed distracted and dashed off to make a phone call. Then she left. She said she was eager to share the news with someone. That was the last time I saw her. I just can't believe it. She was so happy; just like Kalpana Chawla must have been, a little while before she died." Mandira blinked away her tears.

"What time was this?" Nisha asked.

"It was around noon. I remember, because I was feeling unusually hungry, and a celebratory lunch sounded great."

"Did you say she left to share the good news with someone?"

"That's what I think."

"Who was the someone?" Nisha asked feeling impatient.

"No idea. She didn't say." Mandira shrugged.

"Oh come on, you must have a some idea. Could it be Ajit?"

"I don't think so. Why would it be him?" Mandira eyes were round as saucers.

"I have no idea," Nisha was frustrated. The answer was so close, and now it was slipping out of her grasp. "I'm just asking you to guess who it might be."

"Maybe her boyfriend, the one that lived next door to her?" Mandira ventured.

"Who will take over her role in the TV show, now?" Nisha asked.

"I don't know. They're auditioning some actresses, but it's going to be weird. I hope they don't discontinue the show. I was lucky to get a good break at so early. Saloni carried the show on her shoulders. She was so talented. Without her, I don't know what will become of the show." Mandira brooded.

"I'm sure things will work out for you." Nisha patted her shoulder, and offered her a cup of hot coffee.

Mandira seemed distracted as she nodded and cradled the warm cup. "You know, it could be her dad," she said, looking into the distance as she sipped her coffee.

"What could be her dad? What?" Nisha was confused.

"I mean, she might have gone to tell him she had bagged the role. Now that I think of it, that's probably why she said someone. She was secretive about her dad, but somehow everyone knew they had some kind of fight a few years ago. No one knows about what though. I mean, if she was going to celebrate with Asif, she would have just said, Toodles I'm off to celebrate with my boyfriend."

"Toodles?" Nisha stared.

"Yeah, that was her latest pet phrase." Mandira smiled.
"She'd have a different favorite every month. Before
toodles, it was chop-chop."

"Do you think she told her dad the news, and he came over to see her?" Nisha mulled it over. Maybe, he thought it was a good time to reconcile, she hypothesized. He might have considered the possibility that Saloni might not let him in if she saw him on the door cam, so he knocked. But why not take the elevator? Besides, since he was an outsider, wouldn't the guard have a record of him entering? It was all very confusing.

"Even if he did come, would Saloni get drunk around him?" Mandira sounded skeptical.

"Sometimes, alcohol can smooth out difficult conversations." Nisha observed, and Mandira shrugged.

"Tell me, do you know anyone in the building who uses the stairs often?" Nisha asked on a whim.

"Sure. It's a part of Ankita's work out program. She encourages us to use the stairs."

"Really? How many floors can you climb?" Nisha was curious.

"Twice a week, Ajit and I climb a hundred floors together. It's kind of boring to do alone."

"A hundred floors!" Nisha goggled.

"It's not as hard as it sounds." Mandira laughed. "It's an unusual way to exercise, that's all, but it's no harder than doing about forty five minutes of a somewhat intense workout in the gym on the elliptical trainer."

"Really? Did Saloni do this too?"

"Yup. Ankita insists on it for all her clients below the age of forty. She herself does it every alternate day."

"Thank goodness I'm over forty," Nisha blurted out. "I never imagined I would have a reason to say that." She laughed. Then she turned sombre, as she contemplated the implications of what she had just learned.

Fascinating, she thought looking down, as her spectacles slipped a little. The more information she got, the more confusing the mystery became. "So counter-intuitive," she mumbled pushing her spectacles back up.

"So aren't we supposed to work on a tribute to Saloni?" Mandira asked. "Are we making a collage or something?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Sorry, I just can't help being a little curious about her, as I put the collage together. I had never even seen her in life, but I am learning so much about her, now that she is gone. What did you like best about her?"

"I liked that she talked the same way to everybody, be it her boss, or a waitress at a restaurant, or even a child. It wasn't something she did consciously. More like, she just talked a certain way, polite and playful, with everyone."

"And did she have some annoying quirk?" Nisha inquired.

"Well, not a quirk really, but she had two phones, one of which she insisted on keeping on herself at all times. Sometimes, the costume designs made that impossible during a shoot. Then she would hold up the shoot, till she returned from her private quarters after locking it away. A couple of times, I offered to hold on to it while she shot the scene, but she snapped at me. Later, she apologized and told me she wasn't comfortable with payment apps and felt insecure about that phone."

"She had a separate phone for payment apps? That's interesting. Maybe, I should get one too. They make

me very uncomfortable as well. So who would you say was her best friend?"

"Not sure. She didn't seem to have one. She was the life of every party, but not the type to make close friends. I'm guessing colleagues like us were the closest she came to having friends."

"In that case, you must write something for the collage. I'd like it in your handwriting. I like the personal touch. Hope it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. I'd love to do it. What should I write?"

"How about a personal message to her? You could use a few of her pet phrases if you like." Nisha smiled.

"Yes, that's a really good idea. I'll do it. Should I bring it here this evening?"

"Actually, I may be out this evening. Can you send me a photo of the handwritten message on WhatsApp? Also, could you please include some pictures of Saloni?"

"Sure. I'll do that. Let me know if you need any help with the party." Mandira bounced out of the door, leaving Nisha with a lot to ponder over.

Something Mandira had said surprised her. Did Cherian know about it, she wondered. Feeling a little tired, she lay down on the sofa to relax. She had barely closed her eyes to think about all she had learned when the doorbell rang again. She looked at the wall clock and knew who it must be. "You can come in," she called out. "It's not locked."

She heard the door open. "Is that the way to answer the door, Lady?" quipped a familiar voice.

"Who are you, Miss Manners?" Nisha grumbled.

Rohan began to talk about Asif, but Nisha interrupted him. "What day is it, Grasshopper?"

"Thursday, why?" Rohan asked, puzzled.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Nisha raised her eyebrows and waited.

Rohan looked around trying to figure out what she was talking about, and Nisha looked significantly at his bag. "Oh the sums! I did them, Lady," he handed her his notebook.

Nisha accepted it with a satisfactory nod. "Would you really abandon Asif, if I hadn't done them?" Rohan asked.

Nisha shrugged enigmatically. "Did you find out about those letters?" She changed the subject to deflect his question.

Rohan rolled his eyes. "Asif didn't know anything about them. He was very upset when I told him, but I'm glad I did. Imagine how it would be for him to learn about them on the news or on social media."

"So you're absolutely sure he did not write them?" Nisha pressed on.

"I'd bet my life on it. He isn't good at deception, Lady. His face is a transparent window to his emotions. I've known him for years. He wouldn't be able to lie so convincingly. He was really upset that she was cheating on him."

"What do you mean cheating on him? They never even had sex." Nisha observed.

"That's so not the point." Rohan fumed. "He loved her, confided in her and thought they shared a purer form of love than sex. But those letters you showed me, are not just erotica. They are intimate, full of yearning and emotion. Who wrote them to her? Why was the bitch leading my friend on? The dirty slut was using him," he spat.

"That's enough Mr. Agarwal." Nisha's voice barely above a whisper, exuded authority. "I understand you're upset, but you will refrain from using such profanities or hurling baseless allegations. The young woman is dead, and I will not tolerate you disrespecting her. Is that understood?"

"Yes Ma'am." Rohan blushed furiously, his head hanging low. He had never imagined Nisha could be so scary. He didn't even understand what could make the middle aged woman barely over five feet tall so formidable, but he developed new-found respect for her. "I'm s-s-sorry," he stuttered. "But I am sure Asif did not write those letters," he added summoning the courage to assert himself.

"So am I, but I needed confirmation." Nisha sighed. "I have a job for you, Grasshopper." She smiled. "You're pretty good with making stuff like posters and presentations on the computer, right?" Rohan nodded eagerly, relieved that she sounded normal again. He could not bear to be reprimanded by her ever again. Besides, he definitely preferred Grasshopper to Mr. Agarwal. That, for now, was reserved for his father.

"I will send you a bunch of photographs by this evening. I want you to include them all and whatever other filler images you need to make a poster. It's for the tribute party, so choose the material and size

appropriately. It needs to be prominently displayed at the venue. Please make all the arrangements for it, including a stand if needed. This is very important to our case, so please make sure it's done on time. Let me know the cost, and I'll reimburse you for it."

"Aww shucks, Lady. That's not necessary. You're the one doing me a favor. I'll take care of it. Please, just save my friend."

Nisha looked at her phone. "Um.." she hesitated and Rohan looked at her. "Have you ever heard of a song called *Hallelujah*?" she asked.

Rohan stared at her. "Of course, haven't you?"

"No. What kind of song is it?"

"On the surface, it refers to various biblical stories."

"It's a religious song?" Nisha goggled at him, aghast.

"No, Lady. You didn't let me finish. It refers to these biblical stories, but has oddly strong sexual undertones and a haunting tune. It's a classic."

"Oh! So it's not the type of song one would listen to with one's dad or colleagues?"

"I don't know. It depends. Sometimes people just like appreciating good music together. I would think it's the type of song one listens to in solitude or, I can't speak from experience, but I'd guess with a lover."

Nisha nodded, but she couldn't suppress a smile. A fleeting expression of annoyance crossed Rohan's face, but then he shrugged it off.

"What about while working out? Would one listen to it then?" Nisha asked.

"Yeah, could be. It's a little slow, but it's intense too, so some may enjoy it as work out music. I'll send you a link to the song, Lady. Why don't you judge for yourself?"

"Great. Thanks." Nisha nodded.

"So, Lady, do you have any other plausible suspects?"

"Well, her colleague Ajit Mathur seems suspicious. There is something strange going on with her dad too. Ajit also mentioned that someone influential in the industry could either have been having an affair with her, or taking advantage of her. So that's another suspect I need to ask Cherian about." Just then, Nisha's phone rang. "Speak of the devil," she muttered before answering it.

"What really?" Nisha sounded thrilled. "Cherian, can you please stop by my house after your shift?" There was a pause. "Please, I'll order fresh hot *jalebis* for you," Nisha pleaded, and after another short pause, "Thanks so much," she said and hung up.

"Lady, what are you so happy about? In a few hours at most, those letters will be on social media. Asif will be in so much trouble. Already, when I went over this morning his parents were arguing with each other. They sounded so scary and scared, I just waited in the stairwell for them to leave, before meeting him. I was stuck there for almost half an hour. Thankfully, I had carried my e-reader. I read one of the stories by Agatha Christie you recommended. Pretty rad, the egg head dude is. When I finally met Asif, he was so sad. His parents are completely freezing him out. Asif is so lonely and frightened. He is at his wits end, and ..." Rohan looked at Nisha and saw that she was quite abstracted and not listening to a word he had said. Offended, he stopped speaking.

"Did you say, you waited in the stairwell?" Nisha's eyes shone.

"Yes. So you were listening?" Rohan was puzzled. "Are you alright?" he asked, alarmed by Nisha's stunned expression.

"Yes, I am, but I have been so stupid. Why didn't I think of it before. I'm such a total dummy."

"If you say so, Lady." Rohan conceded, beginning to doubt her sanity. "But what about Asif? Did the police say anything?"

"Oh yes. Your friend is safe for now, regarding those letters. The police won't be making them public."

Nisha assured.

"They won't? How? What? Just for once, will you talk sense?"

"Cherian said she was ordered to suppress the letters for the moment, and remove them from evidence by her superior officer, and that the order came from the top brass, way above her pay grade. Apparently, Rashmi, the constable who found the letters, must have blabbed about them to someone."

"That's awesome, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I wonder why? It makes no sense."

"Who cares why? Luck is finally on our side." Rohan celebrated, perhaps prematurely. "I'll get your poster made, Lady. But please find out what you can of the other suspects you mentioned. Maybe, examining one of them might give us information that helps

exonerate Asif." Rohan thanked Nisha for her help and left.

A New Idea

After lunch, Nisha waited for Romila, a third year Physics major to arrive. Nisha was teaching her quantum mechanics. As they discussed probabilistic interpretations and observer dependent realities, Nisha thought the real world where humans interact with each other, rather than with objects, is perhaps more quantum than classical. Reality is what an observer describes it to be, and as is evident from witness testimony, observations can vary greatly from one person to the next, as its interpretation is colored by past experiences and unavoidable prejudices.

Following the discussion, Romila settled down to tackle some mundane problems using boundary conditions. Boundary conditions put constraints on wishy-washy, pointless free particle wavefunctions making them interesting. *And what are the boundary conditions I am missing, that will help me solve my mystery, Nisha wondered. After all, every clue, like a boundary condition, imposes a constraint on the possible suspects. Once all the relevant clues are accounted for, a beautiful and convincing solution emerges.*

After Romila left, Nisha waited impatiently for Cherian to arrive. She had already coaxed Reshma to pick up hot *jalebis* from the local sweet shop. Reshma wasn't too happy about getting *jalebis* for Cherian who had once mercilessly beaten her, but Nisha reminded Reshma that she was doing this to help Asif.

"Of course, Didi. Anything for you. Besides, Rohan Bhaiya helped you save me, so this is the least I can do to help save his friend," she had mumbled shamefacedly.

The *jalebis* sitting on a doily lined glass plate, were calling out to Nisha. Unable to resist any longer, Nisha was about to pick one up, when the doorbell rang.
"About time, Cherian. I almost started on the *jalebis* without you."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Cherian snapped. "Doing house calls for you. I never do that for anyone. You should be grateful."

"Oh, such nonsense. Where do you go after work? I bet you were thrilled to be invited. You can't be married or have friends. Who'd want to spend time with a grouch like you?"

"Seems like you do." Cherian quipped.

"This is business. Here have a *jalebi*." Nisha held the plate up to Cherian."

"Thanks." Cherian softened as soon as she bit into the orange, warm and crispy delight. "So what do you want to know?"

"Do you have any idea, who doesn't want those letters made public and why?"

"No one was forthcoming with that information in the department. It was an order, plain and simple."

"Oh," Nisha chewed on her lip as she fetched a bottle of *jaljeera* she had asked Reshma to make and keep in the fridge.

"But I did some digging around, and since you have been so nice to me, I'll tell you what I have learned." Cherian paused for effect, but Nisha was busy taking out a couple of steel tumblers from her kitchen cabinet.

As she unscrewed the lid on the bottle of *jaljeera*, Cherian continued, "When I first met Saloni's dad at the police station yesterday, he looked familiar. He said his name was Pramod, and something about it bothered me. So I delved into some of the old papers like school certificates and report cards we found in Saloni's apartment. And that's when I realized that

Saloni had changed her name recently." Cherian revealed, as Nisha poured *jaljeera* into the tumblers.

"She had?" Nisha stopped in mid pour. "When? Why?" she asked still holding the bottle.

"My guess is, she did it soon after the big fight with her dad that everyone talks about." Nisha looked at her in confusion. "You see, she used to be Saloni Tiwari, daughter of Pramod Tiwari. But after their fight, she changed her last name to her mother's maiden name, Chaudhari," Cherian explained. Nisha whistled and resumed pouring.

"Wait, isn't Pramod Tiwari some big shot?" Nisha asked, handing Cherian a glass of the cold savory drink, a perfect accompaniment for the sweet *jalebis*.

"Yes, he is a very successful producer and has considerable influence. I am guessing, he is the one who did not want the letters to become public. I think he has his sources in the department, and possibly Rashmi is one of them. She was assigned to me for this case, and I don't know her too well. When he learned about the letters, I think, he wanted to avoid anything scandalous, so he used his influence to suppress them. Saloni went out of her way to obscure her relationship with her father, and he did his best to

hide it too." Cherian smacked her lips after taking a sip of the cold drink.

"Asif mentioned that Saloni believed that in spite of strained relations between them, her dad looked out for her in his own way." Nisha remarked, serving herself a glass of the drink too.

"You mean, in the industry, like helping her get a good role?" Cherian asked, helping herself to more *jalebis*.

"No, I don't think so. I was wondering who the bigwig was. But now it all makes sense."

"What are you talking about?"

"This morning, I spoke to Ajit Mathur, and he mentioned that he was told Saloni was off limits. He thought that was because she was seeing some industry bigwig. But maybe, her dad had made sure she was off limits, without claiming her as his daughter. Given the bigshot he is, I doubt he would have to explain himself."

"That makes sense. He would know how messed up the industry could be for women, and would want to protect her, even if they had fought. But how come Ajit told you this? He never mentioned it when I questioned him." Cherian fumed.

"Why are you so surprised? People are reluctant to volunteer information to the police. They grudgingly answer direct questions."

"But how are we supposed to solve any problems, if people won't trust us?" Cherian complained.

"Police in this country have unfortunately earned a reputation of being bothersome bullies, instead of helpful civil servants. Everyone avoids the police like the plague. Your department needs to change that image."

"I don't need a lecture, teacher. I just need to be able to do my job. Unlike you, I need my job to earn a livelihood, and it's not something I do for fun."

Nisha sighed. "You're right, and I'm sorry. You're trying to help me, and I keep unfairly berating you."

"Did you actually apologize?" Cherian blurted out in disbelief.

"Yes." Nisha grunted. "But don't get used to it." She added, irritably.

"Fine." Cherian smiled. "Let's co-operate. You give me information I can't get, and I'll get you information you can't get. Deal?"

Nisha nodded. "Can you get the tapes of the CCTV for the elevator?"

"I already told you what I learned from them."

"I know. But Mandira mentioned that Saloni snagged a role she was really keen to get, and that immediately after finding out about it, she called someone. Mandira guesses it was her dad. Can you check her phone records to see who she called?"

"She didn't call anyone. And what has this to do with the CCTV on the elevator?"

"She didn't call anyone at all around noon?" Nisha stared at Cherian agog, but Cherian firmly shook her head. "That's strange. Mandira was sure she talked to someone on the phone. By the way, how many phones did you find in Saloni's apartment?"

"One," Cherian replied, feeling frustrated. "How many phones does a young woman need?"

"I don't know about need, but Mandira insists she had two. She said, Saloni had a second phone she exclusively used for payment apps."

The two women stared at each other. "Do you think the murderer also took her second phone?" Perhaps, it

contained some incriminating evidence?" Nisha suggested.

"I'll look into the matter." Cherian promised. "Now tell me about the CCTV."

Nisha told Cherian how Rohan had waited in the stairwell for Asif's parents to leave before ringing their doorbell. "That gave me an idea. What if someone had arrived before Saloni returned, and simply waited for her in the corridor or stairwell. That person would not be seen in the lift camera, if you looked only after Saloni got home. If Saloni met them in the corridor, and they went in together, as Saloni used her key, they wouldn't show up in the doortcam either."

"So you think Saloni's killer entered with her?"
Cherian raised her eyebrows.

"It's a possibility. Mandira thinks she told her dad about the role. Maybe, he came over hoping to patch things up with her. But then suppose their old resentment resurfaced, and he got very angry."

"And what? He threw her out of the balcony?"
Cherian scoffed.

"I don't know. I'm just suggesting some possibilities. I mean who was she calling, and why has her second phone disappeared? Was she calling her dad? What

was this mysterious fight they had? I think the key to the mystery lies somewhere in these unanswered questions, and we'll have to systematically chip away at them to reach our answer."

Cherian nodded. "Everytime I talk to you, this mystery gets more and more complicated. You're no help at all." She glared at Nisha. "What about Ajit Mathur? Do you still think he is the letter writer?"

"Even though he skillfully denied having any romantic or sexual relationship with Saloni, I believe he is a likely candidate. I mean, if this was a secret affair, he might have a reason to keep it that way. Did he have an alibi?"

"Mandira was out to lunch with her colleagues, but Ajit was home that day. It was his day off."

"So it could have been Ajit, she called."

"Or Asif," Cherian pointed out stubbornly.

"No. Mandira said if it was Asif, she would have said so and celebrated publicly. That is evident from her social media posts too. She was celebrating with someone in secret. Was it her dad, or was it Ajit, or someone else, I don't know."

"She couldn't possibly have been with her dad." Cherian objected. "Remember what she was wearing. If she did have the second phone, I can find it by tracing her payments. Then we might be able to find out who she called. I'll let you know, once I do."

Cherian promised. "Perhaps, this mystery person was indeed lurking in the stairwell." Cherian sniggered.

"By the way, how do you know who she called on the phone you found?" Nisha was curious. "I mean, you could look up phone records for regular calls. But WhatsApp messages and calls are encrypted. Her phone must have been locked," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but her phone had a very simple and common pattern lock. Just a few attempts were enough to crack it. Many people use 7, M, L, S or Z as their pattern, so we usually try those before attempting anything more sophisticated. She used M," Cherian explained, and Nisha bit her lip. "Ah, so you use one of those, don't you?" Cherian's eyes twinkled, as she chomped on another *jalebi*.

"Hmph. I guess I'll have to change my password. Thanks for the tip," Nisha mumbled. "You know, I am making a poster for Saloni's tribute party with inputs from her colleagues and friends. I'll let you know if I learn anything interesting," she added in a more friendly tone.

"Great. I have to go now, but can you point me to a washbasin first?" Cherian asked, holding out her sticky fingers.

"Why do you think her secret lover is Ajit?" Cherian asked, rubbing soap all over her hands to rid them of the stickiness.

"Well, his initials are AM, he did flirt with her, and she tried to seduce him. I think, the harder youngsters try to suppress their feelings, the more they pop out in strange ways. Ajit is no doubt career focused, so if he did pursue a relationship with Saloni, ignoring his agent's objections, he would keep it secret, and if Saloni's dad was the responsible for Ajit being told to keep his distance, she too would want their relationship to be a secret. Besides, he was completely enamored by her smile."

"Her smile?" Cherian raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, he spoke of her smile with genuine feeling. I assure you, he wasn't faking that. It was like he had often pondered on what he liked best about her, so when I asked him, the answer just popped out naturally."

"So you think he was the one lurking in the stairwell waiting for her to get home?" Cherian joked.

"No, he wouldn't do it that way. Did you know that he, Mandira and Saloni climbed the stairs regularly as a part of their exercise routine? If Saloni called him to celebrate, then he might take the stairs up, as he probably usually did, if he was her lover, to avoid generating gossip among the security guards. Then he would have entered along with her or knocked and not registered on the door cam. If it was someone else, they could be lurking in the stairwell."

"I'll look into it. Let me see if I can find that second phone, and who she called. Then we'll know." Cherian drained the last bit of her *jaljeera*. "I have stuff to do," she declared before leaving.

Out of courtesy, Nisha had put her phone on silent during Cherian's visit. While turning the ringer back on, she was startled by an overwhelming number of messages. There were a few from Rohan pestering her to send the material quickly, so he could get the poster ready in time. She hastened to find the relevant messages and photos from Ajit, Mandira and Ankita and forwarded them directly to Rohan.

She had a pile of messages waiting from Priya and Sachi. She knew she would have to attend to them right away, but she couldn't resist taking a quick peek at the pictures Ajit had sent her. Did his handwriting match the one in the letters, she simply had to know.

She spent five whole minutes scrutinizing them, going back and forth between the two pictures. But she found nothing conclusive.

There were some similarities between the two sets of handwriting, but it was difficult to ascertain if they were written by the same person. If Ajit was the letter writer, he may have disguised his handwriting a little, or it was possible that his handwriting just happened to be somewhat similar to that of the person who had written the letters. *How disappointing*, Nisha thought. She had been so pleased with herself for coming up with this sneaky idea to obtain Ajit's handwriting, so she would have concrete proof to nail him. *He's smart*, she thought. *Maybe, he guessed what I was up to and disguised his handwriting here. After all, if he did write those letters in his own handwriting, he would guess that the police would have them sooner or later. So perhaps, for a while, he has decided to disguise his writing.* But with more pressing issues at hand, Nisha couldn't stop to brood over Ajit's deviousness.

As Nisha scrolled through her contacts to call Priya on WhatsApp, she noticed the message Priya had sent her regarding the ME's determination of Saloni's time of death. The information though precise, wasn't particularly helpful. Asif was sleeping at the time, so he had no alibi anyway. Perhaps, it could be used to incriminate Ajit. Nisha hoped Cherian would manage

to get some information about Saloni's second phone. She could think of no other way to move forward with her investigation. Every avenue so far had led to dead ends.

Sachi came over that evening and reassured Nisha that all the plans were going well. "I'm actually excited," she admitted. "It's been so long since I planned one of these. And now I have a team of minions to take care of the annoying details, so I can relax and enjoy myself."

"I'm exhausted," Nisha responded. "I promised a few people that I would introduce them to you. Hope that's okay," she yawned.

"I see you think it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission." Sachi's lips twitched.

Nisha shrugged. "Do you know Pramod Tiwari?" she asked.

"I've met him a couple of times. Why?"

"Apparently, he is Saloni's dad. He came all the way to Asif's house to yell at him."

"The first part is all over the news. I think he tried to suppress it. Otherwise, it would have been out there

right from the start. And no one still knows what they fought about."

Nisha told Sachi all about her sole encounter with the man. "The thing is, if Saloni had stopped talking to him, how could he know that she had never had sex with Asif? My gut tells me that's one of the keys to the mystery, but I can't figure out how."

"He brought her up, and they were very close for a long time. Maybe, he knows her well."

"Yes, I considered that. But he knows nothing about Asif. So what would make him so sure?"

"She could be a virgin." Sachi suggested. "Maybe, she promised her dead mother that she would stay chaste until she got married."

"Are you for real? She's not a character from a Bollywood movie, you know." Nisha rolled her eyes. "Wait, you think that's why her dad made sure she was off limits?" Nisha asked, doubt creeping into her voice. "No. You're crazy. She tried to seduce Ajit when she was drunk. Impossible."

"Well, she was drunk. People do dumb things when they're drunk."

Nisha burst out laughing. "You know, you almost had me going. I kind of got sucked into your bizarre idea. But what about AM?"

"AM? What's that?"

"Her secret lover. He wrote erotic letters to her, and signed them with those initials."

"What? I haven't heard any such thing." Sachi was intrigued.

"Her dad used all his pull and influence to suppress the letters."

"Then how do you know? Did her ghost tell you?" Sachi sniggered.

"No, Cherian did. The constable under her supervision, was the one who found the letters while searching the house."

"Cherian?" Sachi's eyebrows shot up. "You two seem to be getting pally," she teased.

"She's not as bad as she first seemed," Nisha mumbled.

"Yes, I see a lot of that in working with people," Sachi nodded. "So who do you think is AM?" Sachi waggled

her eyebrows.

"I think it is Ajit Mathur, but Cherian disagrees. I think she just likes being contrary." Nisha complained.

Sachi laughed. "It's funny hearing you say that about Cherian, after all the trouble you've caused her." Nisha sighed and then joined Sachi in her mirth.

"What's so funny?" Priya asked, when she dropped in.
"Sachi, I'm so glad you're here. There are some papers your assistant will have to sign, agreeing to uphold all the society rules, etc. Can you tell him to drop by the society office tomorrow morning and take care of it?"

"I'll do that." Sachi nodded trying to contain her giggles.

"So how are things in your society?" Nisha asked, looking at Priya.

"Well, most people are convinced Asif killed her. The WhatsApp groups are rife with gossip. Some are speculating about the possibility that Ajit had been in a relationship with her too. There is a lot of excitement about Pramod Tiwari being Saloni's dad. I got several of messages asking me if he would be coming to the tribute party." Priya rolled her eyes.

"The things people choose to care about." Nisha snorted in disgust.

The three of them worked together finalizing various details for the event. Sachi had made arrangements for about fifty guests. The society had a contract with caterers, so the food would be provided by them. Sachi's assistant took care of decorations, seating, lighting, the sound system and the celebrity guest list. Most of the guests were going to be from Saloni's housing society. However, a few celebrities, journalists and media personalities would be there. Nisha too couldn't help wondering if Saloni's dad would show up. "Did you invite Saloni's dad?" Nisha asked Sachi.

"No. Do you want me to?"

"No, that's okay. I just wondered if you had." Nisha clarified.

"He might come anyway." Sachi pointed out.

Priya was about to say something, when her phone beeped. After replying to a message from the caterer, she was distracted. "This is not good." She clicked her tongue and squinted, as she scrolled through a an endless string of WhatsApp messages. They had been

piling up for a while on one of the society gossip groups she kept muted.

Intrigued, Nisha and Sachi leaned in to take a look. Priya clicked on a video that had been uploaded on the group. It showed Asif smoking a cigarette in a shabby room with unpainted walls and crumbling windows.

"Where is he?" Nisha asked, confused. "Why was this recorded? The boy is stupid if he smokes, but how is this bad?"

"It's bad, really bad," Priya said, and then showed her some of the messages.

Nisha stared unable to believe what she was reading. The messages accusing him of being a murderer, a psychopath and a heartless evil monster, were peppered with violent threats and profanity. "Why?" she asked, utterly baffled. "I don't understand. All this, for smoking?"

The Smoking Gun

Sachi shook her head. "It's just people venting. Suspicion on him has been mounting. People are angry. And in this communal climate, things get even more complicated."

"Who posted this video? The same people who live above him?" Nisha asked. "Also, what's so criminal about smoking? I mean it's stupid, reckless and suicidal, but plenty of people do it, especially college students."

"But in our building common areas, smoking is not permitted. There are signs everywhere. So, technically, he is breaking the law. People still do it, but this is a fire refuge flat." Priya explained. When Nisha and Sachi looked puzzled, she clarified, "Since our building is so tall, regulations require that in every five continuous floors, there must be at least one fire refuge area. To comply with this requirement, the builder set aside one flat on every floor that's a multiple of five as a refuge space."

"Oh, I see. We have a couple of floors that are half empty and to be used as fire refuge areas in our building too." Nisha said

"Yes, exactly. Your building too has fifteen floors. That's quite a bit, so it would require refuge areas." Priya nodded before continuing. "Our builder just dedicated some flats for the purpose, so we call them refuge flats. A video of him smoking in the very place we are to rush to for safety in case of a fire, has really angered people."

"Oh, I see!" Nisha exclaimed, finally understanding. "Stupid, stupid boy. To go smoke where he knows there are cameras watching him..." Nisha shook her head.

"He didn't know there was a camera." Priya corrected her.

"Why not? Don't all the refuge flats have cameras installed?"

"No. Our building has CCTV coverage only in the lifts and building entrances."

"Then I don't understand. How is he on camera? This looks like CCTV footage."

"For the last month or so, every few days, the resident who stays opposite this refuge flat had been noticing cigarette butts just outside the entrance to the refuge flat. When he checked the inside of the flat, he found quite a few butts lying under one of the windows. He

made several posts about it on the group, but the smoker continued to go there to smoke. Frustrated, the resident complained to the society's managing committee. Recognizing the dangers of a fire, last week, the committee installed a nanny cam in the refuge flat and the concerned resident volunteered to review the footage. This morning, he posted this video on the society WhatsApp group."

"Asif probably isn't on the society WhatsApp group, so he had no idea." Sachi observed. "And presumably, his parents did not know about his smoking, which was why he went there in the first place. So they did not pay any attention to the posts."

"The thing is, they are using this to show that he has no regard for human life. This coupled with the earlier video of him attacking his upstairs neighbor with a bucket of water, and his family being Muslim has all snowballed together into the society people considering him dangerous. They are clamoring for his arrest." Priya explained.

Nisha tapped her phone screen a few times. "I see it's all over social media too." She sighed. "I wonder how his parents reacted."

"When do they get back from their work?" Sachi asked.

"I don't know, but in the last week, they have buried themselves in work to avoid dealing with Asif's situation. It's crazy." Nisha replied.

"He seemed to be in a really dark place, the last time we saw him." Priya brooded. "Do you think we should go talk to him?"

Nisha and Sachi agreed, and the trio left for Asif's house. When they got there, the door was ajar. Nisha frowned and looked at the other two. Priya shrugged, and Sachi knocked on the door tentatively.

Rohan came out. "Thank god you're here!" he exclaimed wide eyed in terror. "I d-don't know w-w-what to do," he stammered, as he pressed his hands together in panic, looking pleadingly at the three women.

"What happened, Rohan?" Nisha asked, trying to calm him down, but all he could do was blubber incoherently.

"Rohan," Sachi gripped him firmly by his shoulders. "Tell us what you know," she demanded trying to shake him out of his helpless state. "Your friend needs you Rohan. What happened?" she persisted.

"Nisha, Sachi," Priya called out. She had already dashed off inside to check on Asif. "He's taken too

many sleeping pills. We have to get him to the hospital right away. I'm calling Abhay. I hope it's not too late." She bit her lips, as she dialed her husband.

"What?" Nisha gasped. "Rohan, how long have you been here?" She shook him violently. "How did you get in?" she demanded.

Rohan tried to steady himself. He looked at his watch and took a deep breath. "I saw the video on social media about an hour ago and called him right away." He finally found his voice, and then the flood gates opened.

He sobbed as he continued, "He didn't answer the phone, so I called again. When he didn't answer three calls in a half an hour period, I got really worried. I was on my way here, when I thought that if he was too ashamed to answer the phone, he might not open the door either. But I wanted to talk to him. He has always kept a copy of his key at my house. So I brought it along. When I got here, I rang the bell and knocked. But no one answered. Finally, I told him I was coming in whether or not he liked it, and I used the key. I expected him to try to push me out or something, no one was in the living room. So I went to his room. And there, I found him lying in bed. I had just seen the open bottle of sleeping pills when you knocked." Rohan finished his story, just as Abhay arrived.

Priya led Abhay to Asif's room. As he checked Asif's pulse and examined his heart rate with his stethoscope, his expression turned grave. "I have already notified the nearest hospital. The ambulance should be arriving in a few minutes." He turned to look at Asif. "His pulse has really slowed down. He will need to have the drugs pumped out of his system, but I think he will be fine. You got to him in time."

Rohan nodded in relief. "We need to inform his parents, but I don't have their number." He looked around the room and spotted Asif's phone. He unlocked it using the pattern he had seen Asif use numerous times. The screen that appeared, was the one Asif had last viewed. It was an angry message from his mother, with the video of him smoking in the refuge flat, attached. Rohan stared at it. Nisha looked over his shoulder and read the message. Overwhelmed by a mixture of anger and sadness, she grabbed the phone and sent a message to Asif's mother updating her of the situation. She included the details of the hospital Asif was being taken to, and expressed hope that his parents would be there for him.

When the ambulance carrying Asif arrived at the hospital, the staff took him straight to the emergency ward. Abhay escorted Rohan and Nisha to a waiting

area, and then dashed off to check on his patient. Nisha noticed a frantic couple talking to the man at the information desk. She tapped Rohan on the shoulder. "Aren't those Asif's parents?" she asked.

When Rohan nodded, she walked over to them. "Hello, you must be Asif's parents," she said loudly to attract their attention. "Dr. Abhay Desai contacted this hospital with details about your son's condition and arranged for the ambulance. He will do his best to ensure Asif is alright." Nisha assured the distraught couple. "Come, let's get a cup of coffee, while we wait for the doctor to return." Nisha urged, but they seemed bewildered. "I am Nisha. I don't know if you remember me. We used to live in the same housing society," she added introducing herself. "But you must know Rohan." She gestured at him, and saw the light of recognition in Asif's mother's eyes.

"Oh Rohan!" The lady burst into sobs. "What happened to him? I got such a frightening message from him. What has he done?" Her husband held her against his chest to calm her down, while he struggled to hold back his own tears.

While Rohan explained how he had gone to check on Asif, and what they had found there, Nisha watched Asif's parents' expression change from fear to horror mingled with shame. His dad did not say a single

word, but as he took off his spectacles and closed his eyes, Nisha noticed tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes. He sat down to steady himself. Asif's mother was inconsolable, sobbing and gasping for breath. Nisha gently held her hand. "Let's go get that coffee while we wait," she suggested.

The couple nodded and followed Rohan and her like zombies into the hospital cafeteria. "I'm Noor," the woman finally said after stemming her sobs.

"And I'm Rizwan," her husband added. "Thank you for everything you have done for our son. I do remember you coming to the *biryani* stall we used to put up in our old society for the Christmas Gala. Nishaji, you were always an enthusiastic customer."

When the coffee arrived, they all sipped in silence until Noor spoke. "Rohan, Asif is really lucky to have you for a friend," her voice broke as she pressed Rohan's hand. "Thank you for looking out for him."

Rohan nodded, still looking very tense. But just then, Abhay arrived. "He's going to be okay. We managed to get most of the drug out of his system. The hospital will be keeping him here overnight for observation. But then he can go home, tomorrow. You do need to take him to a psychiatrist though, for regular counseling for at least a year."

Noor nodded. "Can I talk to him now?"

"No, he is still recovering from the effect of the drug and the treatment, so he is sedated. I recommend he not be woken up. You can however sit by him, if you want to. They will wheel his bed into a private room as you requested in about half an hour. In the mean time, I need to go check on him." Abhay dashed back to his patient.

"Noor, I would like to speak to you privately for a minute. Will you please come with me to the garden outside?" Nisha urged.

"Of course." Noor nodded, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion as she followed Nisha.

"Please don't admonish him. He is very fragile right now. I know you are angry but .."

Before Nisha could finish her sentence Noor interrupted, "How dare you accuse me of being a monster? You think I don't care about the well being of my own son? You don't know anything about us. You waltz in like a fairy godmother and you think you understand what's happening. You don't have a clue." She glared at Nisha with the fierceness of a tigress protecting her cubs.

"Look, I -I don't mean to offend. I was just concerned. I -I am the one who saw your message and replied to it." Nisha had never felt so confused and embarrassed. She did not know what to make of Noor, but she had to speak up for Asif's sake. The boy was headed into a downward spiral, and he would need his parents to be supportive. This dangerous outcome could have been avoided, if they had not reacted in anger, she brooded.

Noor stopped in her tracks blushing furiously. "You sent me the message. How?"

"Sorry, but I thought you had to know. Rohan did not know your number, but he knew the pattern your son used to unlock his phone," Nisha too blushed, realizing she had invaded their privacy.

"I am grateful," Noor admitted. "I would have never forgiven myself if anything had happened to him. Rohan and you saved him. But still, there is a lot you don't understand, so don't judge me as a parent." She looked Nisha straight in the eye, challenging her to disagree.

"I'm not." Nisha shook her head, but then she remembered how she felt when she saw Noor's angry message on Asif's phone. "Actually, to be honest, I am. Perhaps, it is wrong of me to say this, but I need to understand. How could you pull away from him,

and leave him to battle this all alone. It's too much for his young shoulders." Nisha didn't even bother to fight her tears.

"Too much? You think this is too much? This is just the beginning, and I need him to know his real world. He can't be an idealist."

"What?" Nisha was baffled.

"He was dating a Hindu girl."

Nisha's face hardened as she glared at Noor. "I see from your expression, that you now think I am a bigot." Noor sighed. "I assure you, I am not. I'm just practical. I will not let my son walk blindly into a situation, where he is beaten up by the love jihad vigilante. I liked the girl. She was kind and sweet, but naive. She posted pictures of their dates all over the net. Asif needed to learn how much trouble that could cause him in today's climate. He doesn't know about the kind of monsters prowling the outside world, all eager to pounce on him for the religion he was born into. I've been trying to tell him how things have changed in the last few years, but he still lives in the idealism of the times we brought him up in. He needed to experience this for himself, but I went too far. You have no idea what it feels like as a mother to shock your son with a world you never prepared him for,

hoping he would never have to face it. And to think, this is only the beginning," Noor sobbed.

Nisha felt ashamed as she patted Noor on her shoulder trying to calm her down. *When had things become like this? When did we start viewing old loved neighbors with suspicion and hatred,* she wondered. *And why do we corner them into such impossible positions that backfire on us?* She shook her head feeling angry and helpless. "I'm sorry I judged you," she said out loud. "I can't even begin to imagine the complexities of the situation you're dealing with. I sincerely apologize."

"You don't know the half of it," Noor continued as if a dam had broken on her fears and sorrows. "Look at this video being circulated on the society WhatsApp group." She shoved her phone at Nisha.

Nisha clicked the play button. It was a viscous doctored video about Muslims spitting into milk canisters before delivering the milk to Hindu customers. Incendiary language was used in the commentary to incite violent feelings towards Muslims in general. Nisha could not stomach more than half a minute of it. She shut it off. She noticed that some of the group members had responded by insulting and attacking Muslims in general, while the rest stayed silent. "Now can you imagine what our life

is like? To see such messages from our own neighbors?" Noor bleated.

Nisha was at a complete loss as to what to say. She struggled to find words of comfort, but they all sounded so hollow. She stared despondently at the ground, while Noor calmed herself. Finally Noor broke the silence. "I sincerely thank you. Without you and Rohan, this parenting mistake could have proved fatal." She pressed Nisha's shoulder, conveying a lot more than any words could have.

"You need to find him a good lawyer and talk to him yourself." Nisha urged.

"I know." Noor nodded. "We already have, and we're going to get him help for his smoking addiction too," Noor promised. "At least, now I know where he was going between 3:00 and 4:00 everyday. After all we taught him about the dangers of smoking too," she muttered under her breath.

Nisha hugged her. "I have to get home now, but please don't hesitate to ask for help anytime you need it," Nisha insisted before leaving for home.

When Nisha returned from the hospital, Raj was already home. He walked over to her and gave her a

hug. It was just what she needed, a no questions asked hug. How did he know, she wondered. But he always did, and she was glad they had found each other. He put the food to heat in the microwave and set the table for dinner, as Nisha washed up and brushed her hair back into a neat ponytail. Feeling refreshed she finally spoke. "I was at the hospital."

"I figured. It's all over the news. But you should eat first. You must be tired."

They ate their *sambhar* rice and *karela bhaji* in silence. Then Raj revealed a surprise he had in store. "Strawberry ice-cream!" Nisha squealed in delight. "Raj, you know we shouldn't," she admonished, abruptly changing her tone. "We need to watch our diet. Our cholesterol was high in our last report," she reminded him.

"I know, and most days I follow your strict diet, Teacherjee, but today, after watching the news, I knew you'd need cheering up." Raj said, dangling a spoon in front of Nisha.

She narrowed her eyes and grabbed the spoon in a huff. "Fine, thanks, but don't call me Teacherjee," she barked.

"I won't, if you won't scold me like a Teacherjee," Raj laughed, taking out another spoon for himself.

As they sat side by side digging into the tub of creamy strawberry ice-cream with chunks of frozen Mahabaleshwar strawberries, Nisha told Raj all about her day. "I can't believe he smokes." Nisha complained. "With all these warnings and research data available, how could the boy be so stupid?"

"Come on Nisha, you must remember what peer pressure was like." Raj replied.

"I most definitely do not. I never succumbed to it." Nisha retorted.

"No?" Raj raised his eyebrows? "Not even when you broke the rules, and wore a sleeveless top to college?" he asked with a sly grin.

"That's different. I was making a feminist statement, not giving into peer pressure."

"Sure. Whatever you need to tell yourself, but I doubt you'd have done it, if Roopa, Sandhya and Manisha hadn't. They were your girl group after all." He winked.

"So? My friends and I made a statement together? Anything wrong with it?"

"Hey, I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I love the defiant look you have in the photo you girls took that day. It's why I tease you about it. To see that defiance pour through your eyes again. But can you honestly tell me peer pressure wasn't a motivator for you? As I recall, the first time you told me the story, you mentioned that you were a reluctant participant. At least, that's what you told your mother when you got suspended for a day."

"Who told you that?" Nisha glared at him.

"Sapna." Raj smiled.

"My sister?" Nisha gasped.

"She filled in some details when I told her it was my favorite picture of you."

"But I wasn't doing anything stupid. Smoking is dangerous, with drastic long term consequences, Raj."

"I know, but peer pressure can be a lot more suffocating in engineering college. It's not easy. I used to smoke, you know."

Nisha stared at her husband like he had just grown another head. "You never told me that!"

"It was for just a year. In my final year, I was stressed out about my project. My roommate smoked like a chimney. My friends insisted it was relaxing, and that it helped you think more clearly. They teased me too for being a Mama's boy. I gave into peer pressure. Disgusting as it initially feels, it is quickly addictive. I was lucky I managed to kick the habit soon after I graduated. I told no one at home. I was too ashamed. But not everyone succeeds in kicking the habit. You see, we knew cigarettes were dangerous, but we rationalized that was true only in the long run. We all convinced ourselves we'd quit soon after college."

"And did all of you?"

"No. A couple of my close friends in college remained life long smokers. We lost touch, but we connected on facebook last year, when one of them was critical with lung cancer. You see, in some people the addiction is very strong and difficult to do away with." It was rare to see Raj look so sad.

Nisha gave him a warm hug. He shook it off and became his usual cheerful self. "I can't believe the society put a nanny cam in the refuge area though."

"I wish Noor had put a nanny cam in Asif's room, then we could prove his innocence." Nisha joked.

"It's not funny Nisha." Raj objected. "As useful as modern technology is, I think it is too intrusive, and youngsters suffer the most," Raj lamented.

"Adolescence is an important stage in human development, when we learn to handle risk and social interactions. In the past, mistakes were simply learning experiences, and not the haunting lifelong embarrassments they are today." Raj observed.

"I agree. Stringent and effective privacy protection laws are crucial in today's world. Society hasn't been able to keep up with technology. How is it that we are able to amass so much scientific and technological knowledge so quickly, but social progress is so slow?" Nisha wondered out loud.

"For technology to progress, just a few enthusiasts need to study and improve upon the status quo, and with every generation we get step by step steady progress. The important thing is technological development does not involve the participation of the masses. The masses only use technology, not develop it. For social progress the masses must actively participate, and inertia is huge for large populations. In fact, not only is social progress slow, but it also slides backwards in turbulent times."

"You may have something there. Larger the mass, greater the inertia, and greater the force needed to

change its momentum."

Raj smiled. "Yeah, that works. Newton was a genius. But I don't think even he could deal with the negative mass of social inertia."

"No. Society is beyond physics, but the Casimir effect comes close I guess."

"Whatever you say, Dear. Anyway, have you called off the party? Surely you don't plan to have it with Asif in hospital?"

"Oh no! Now more than ever before we must, to find out the truth. Priya and Sachi agreed. They have been working on the last minute details for the party. I need to check for messages from them. I hope Rohan will get the poster done in time."

Raj rolled his eyes. "I buy you strawberry ice-cream and get reprimanded, while you go to bed making love to your phone. How unfair is that?"

"Oh Raj! Don't get jealous of my phone. It's not sexy." Nisha objected.

Raj turned around, and narrowed his eyes. Without a word, he lifted her off her feet and kissed her. Nisha forgot all about phones and parties and murders. Did her brain melt? She wasn't sure, but the next quarter of

an hour was pure bliss. "Wow! I should accuse you of being jealous of my phone more often." Nisha panted, as she lay naked and exhilarated in Raj's arms.

"I like it better when you're too occupied to talk," he said kissing her lips to shut her up. It had been a while since she had been so turned on. This time, her orgasm was even more intense and lasted longer. Exhausted, she fell asleep in his arms and did not wake up until her regular alarm buzzed early next morning.

It's going to be a busy day, she thought, stretching as she woke up with a smile. But then she remembered Asif in hospital, and her smile faded. *What else can I possibly do,* she wondered. She had no leads at all.

Ajit seemed like the only possibility, but no more than Asif. She had no clue who the real culprit could be, and no way to prove that it wasn't Asif. It could be anyone from Saloni's office, or someone she met at a bar and struck up a friendship with. Nisha cringed at her own hubris in believing she could help with this case. She was no detective, just an ordinary old science teacher.

She longed to go back to bed. Raj was stirring. Maybe, if she cuddled him, they could both just wake up the next morning when the world had fixed itself like a fairytale. She shook her head. This was not the time to indulge in pointless fantasies. She had made a

commitment, and she owed it to Rohan and Asif to do her best. Reluctantly, she unlocked her phone to check her messages.

Rohan's message said he would be arriving with the printed poster around noon. Cherian's message said Asif was to be taken into custody as soon as he was discharged from hospital, which would most likely be this morning. Nisha couldn't bear the idea of Asif in jail given his current fragile state. Could Priya get Abhay to delay his discharge, she wondered. Surely as a doctor, Abhay too would be concerned about his mental health, and agree that discharging him to the police might cause severe damage.

Nisha looked through her WhatsApp chats searching for Priya. There were several new messages from her regarding the party. The last message she had read was the one with the ME's analysis on Saloni's exact time of death. As she looked at the message, something Noor had said the previous evening set the gears whirring in her brain. *Could the answer be so simple*, she wondered. She must have been very tired. The answer had been staring her in the face since last evening. And the stupid boy! At least, he should have known. Obviously, he had been too upset to think clearly. Anyway, it wasn't too late. All she needed was a little help from Cherian. Noor may not know it, but she may have saved Asif.

"Cherian, I need you to do something for me." Nisha blurted out into the phone as soon as Cherian answered.

"It's very early. I have to get ready to go to work. Can't this wait?" Cherian whined.

"Cherian, I can prove Asif is innocent," Nisha declared, "but I will need your help."

"You can prove ..." Cherian sounded skeptical, and Nisha could imagine her wrinkling her eyebrows.

"Yes." Nisha asserted and told her what she needed. Cherian agreed. Nisha gritted her teeth and then began her day. Crossing her fingers, she hoped Cherian would succeed. While a glitch seemed unlikely, things did have a way of going wrong for Asif, she reflected.

When Raj came to the dining table for breakfast, Nisha was ladling steamy, creamy oats flavored with jaggery powder and cinnamon into a couple of bowls. "Wow, that smells really good. And I'm hungrier than usual. I wonder why." He winked and kissed Nisha on her cheek. "Wait, is something wrong? You seem tense," he added.

Nisha updated him with everything she had learned that morning about Asif's situation. "I'm waiting for

Cherian," she said, gently blowing over a spoon of oats to cool it down.

"Well, best of luck. If you're right, this nightmare should end soon for Asif. Well done, Nish. Hang tight." Raj smiled, attacking his bowl of oats with gusto.

Halfway through his bowl, he noticed Nisha had barely touched her food. "What? You don't seem as happy as you should." Raj was puzzled.

"I am happy for Asif, but also a little tense. It's not over till the fat lady sings, you know."

"So sing." Raj's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Are you implying, I'm fat?" Nisha glared at him.

"Gotta go to office, Honey." Raj dabbed his face with a napkin, picked up his briefcase and put on his shoes.

Nisha rolled her eyes and blew him a kiss when he turned to wave goodbye before leaving. She then gulped down her now cold oats without interest and waited for Cherian to contact her. But Nisha hated waiting. She fidgeted with her fingers and paced up and down her living room, periodically glancing at the clock. "How long could Cherian possibly take to do

something so simple, the incompetent moron," Nisha grumbled, but she knew she was being unfair.

Cherian had turned out to be a lot more thoughtful and sensitive than she had imagined. She wondered how much it cost Cherian to do the harsh things she had to sometimes do to keep her job. Like Cherian had pointed out, the system compelled her to do certain things to keep a job she badly needed. Still, she could have not beaten Reshma, at least not so much. Or had she changed? Perhaps, something had happened on the job that made her more compassionate. Well, it's not like Cherian was going to tell her. They weren't exactly friends. But perhaps, someday.

The doorbell rang drawing Nisha out of her reverie. Cherian entered. She looked at Nisha and nodded, as her lips curved into a tiny smile.

"It worked?" Nisha asked still looking for confirmation, too frightened that she might jinx the situation by celebrating prematurely.

"You can relax. It did. I have already informed my superiors, and everyone is convinced that Asif is innocent. I have even informed his parents."

"You cruel, cruel woman. Why didn't you tell me earlier? I have been so tense all morning. I didn't even

taste my oats." She looked ruefully at the empty cup.

"You're never happy. I don't know why I bother doing anything for you. Instead of thanking me, you complain and call me cruel. I only waited to make sure all the i's were dotted and t's were crossed before I told you, so as not to get your hopes up, in case something went wrong."

"You're absolutely right Cherian, and that's very considerate of you. I'm sorry. I was edgy, and waiting helplessly makes me crazy. Please tell me how it all went."

"I called the society and asked them for the footage of the nanny cam for the entire week. They were reluctant, but I promised to use only what I needed for my murder investigation. Finally, they relented. You were right. He arrived there a little before 3:00, stood by the window space and smoked. Then he lay down sucking a mint or something and fell asleep. The recording showed him there for the entire hour between three and four, perhaps longer. I did not watch carefully beyond 4:00, but he finally left the room at around 4:15. As you already know, the ME was quite specific about time of death being between 3:20 and 3:40. Even the local residents claim they heard the crash around 3:30. So he is completely off the hook."

Nisha breathed a sigh of relief. "So it is over."

"Stupid boy. Wasted my time. Why didn't he tell the truth about where he was? Even with the threat of arrest, he still tells lies. If you ask me, he deserves a few days in jail." Cherian grumbled.

"He was too scared to admit he was smoking. Besides, he didn't know there was a camera there to prove his whereabouts at the time of the murder, and therefore his innocence. And when he saw the video, he was too distraught to think straight."

"I guess he told the truth about being asleep, just not where." Cherian sighed.

"The video even explains why his breath smelled of mints when you went to talk to him." Nisha observed, elated. "This is solid proof. Rohan will be so thrilled. He really is a loyal friend." She stopped, when she noticed that Cherian was preoccupied. "What's the matter?"

"Congratulations! You solved your problem. But I still have to solve mine. I need to find the real culprit." Cherian pointed out.

"Oh, right. Sorry, but for a moment I forgot about that. The party for paying tribute to Saloni is this evening. Why don't you come to it? Maybe, you can learn

something useful for your investigation. The person who killed her may be there, after all. And, I know I'm no professional, but I'll be happy to help in anyway I can."

"Me? Come for that glitzy shindig?" Cherian raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "I don't do fancy. I don't have anything to wear."

"Ever?" Nisha raised her eyebrows. "You don't go to family functions dressed in that uniform, do you?"

"No!" Cherian frowned. "I just don't run with such a fancy crowd. I wear sarees." Cherian blushed.

"So do I. Besides, I'd love to see you in a saree. I bet you'd look gorgeous. Why don't you stop by here first? We'll go together," Nisha offered.

Cherian hesitated. "No. I'll be a fish out of water."

"Oh for crying out loud, just toughen up. What do you care what people think? You're there to do your job and eat some good food. And if anyone bothers you, just scare them away with your freaky scowl."

"I don't have a freaky scowl," Cherian objected.

"And there it is," Nisha smiled. "Drop by at five. We'll all go together."

"All?" Cherian sounded apprehensive.

"You, me and my husband, Raj." Nisha clarified.

"Oh, okay." Cherian nodded and shrugged. "Fine, I'll see you at five," she promised before leaving.

Nisha stretched out on the sofa with her back against one of the squashy upholstered handles. She made a list of all the people she had to call, including, Rohan, Priya, Sachi and Noor. She decided to begin with Noor. "Hi, I was just going to call you," Noor said, as soon as she answered the phone. "Thank you so much for what you did for Asif. I'm never going to forget. We all owe you a debt of gratitude. We're taking Asif home." Her voice sounded tearful and happy at the same time.

"You owe me nothing, except perhaps a some *biryani*." Nisha smiled.

"Done. Whenever you want it. And loads of it," came Noor's enthusiastic response.

"But seriously, I'm glad Asif will be home. He needs a safe and supportive environment to recover. I'm sure Saloni's death took a toll on him. I know you don't like parenting lectures, and you are no doubt a wonderful

mother, but I must say this, so bear with me. Please encourage him to talk about his relationship with Saloni. He needs to come to terms with what happened."

"You've earned your right to some lecturing, I guess." Noor conceded. "I promise I will encourage him to talk about her. And really, I can't thank you enough, but I should get back to Asif now."

Nisha agreed. Besides, she needed to call Rohan next. "Thanks so much, Lady. I knew you could do it. You're a super sleuth and your genius is being wasted on math classes." Rohan rattled on, when Nisha brought him up to date on the situation.

"Rohan, have you ever considered the possibility that sorting through information to find relevant pieces and then fitting them together logically are all skills I have honed by doing math?"

"Fine, do math in your free time, but be a detective too."

"Have you got the poster ready for the party? When are you going to bring it?"

"Are you going ahead with the party then? What's the point?" Rohan was puzzled. "You already cleared Asif."

"Rohan, I made a commitment. I do not cancel on people last minute. You promised to get the poster ready." Nisha sounded stern.

"Jeez, Lady. You're scary. I'll get it done. I promise. I'll bring it over by noon. Besides, I guess you've only cleared Asif, so far. You still have to solve the murder, don't you?" Nisha was annoyed by the smug satisfaction in his tone.

"I'm not in the habit of leaving things half done," she retorted with dignity. "Bring the poster to the party venue at noon, Grasshopper. I'll be there. I might need your help with setting it up."

"You got it, Lady." Rohan promised before hanging up.

Next, Nisha called Sachi and Priya in a WhatsApp video group call finalizing the details of the party, and gave them the good news regarding Asif.

"That's wonderful!" Priya smiled. "Nisha you rock. You know, you're really good at this. First you saved Reshma and now Asif. Abhay was worried about the boy. He is in a really dark place and needs help."

"Yes prison would have been the worst thing that could have happened to him. I'm so glad you figured it

out Nisha. Cherian too seems to be decent." Sachi added.

"Yes, I couldn't have done this without her. Asif must thank her. She really went out on a limb for him. I hope it hasn't messed with her career."

"If it has, you should team up with her to start a detective agency for local problems. God knows we seem to have enough of them!" Priya observed.

"No. In spite of all her complaints, I can tell, she takes pride in being in public service. Besides, it's her position there that enabled us to figure this all out. Every amateur detective needs a police friend. Poirot had Japp, Holmes had Lestrade, and Fatty had Inspector Jenks."

"Fatty? Who's that?" Sachi was confused.

"Fredrick Algeronon Trottville from the *Five Find-Outers* by Enid Blyton," Nisha clarified.

"Goodness, will you be getting a dog like Buster too?" Priya giggled.

"Hmm. There's an idea." Nisha's eyes lit up. "With the kids gone, why not? Let's see, I think Raj will like it too. He loves dogs."

"You're crazy, Nisha." Sachi laughed. "I'll come over to play with your dog, if you get one. But you know what, the mystery isn't solved, yet. We know it isn't Asif, but who then?"

"How is she supposed to figure that out? It could be anyone from anywhere." Priya shrugged.

"Yeah, but we're having the party anyway. So I'll try to find out what I can, there." Nisha said.

"Excellent. Let me know if I can help in any way." Sachi was thrilled.

"Me too. I'm not going to be left out." Priya frowned.

"Sure, girls. See you in the evening. And I forgot to mention, but Cherian will be coming along too!"

"You really have become best buddies, haven't you?" Sachi laughed, while Priya looked astonished.

Nisha was just about to go see what Reshma had made for lunch, when her phone rang. "Aargh, not again. I've had enough of the phone for now," she grumbled, but when she saw that Rohan was the caller, she decided to answer it. "What is it, Grasshopper?" She couldn't help sounding annoyed.

"Lady, I've been chatting with Asif, trying to cheer him up. He is very grateful to you for clearing him of suspicion, but he made a request."

"What?" Nisha asked, her tone softening.

"He wants to add a message to the poster, and he wants to come to the party too. It will help him get closure, Lady. Please." Rohan begged.

"Sure," Nisha smiled, encouraged that Asif was doing all the right things. Perhaps, he had already had a session with a psychiatrist. Actually, Nisha thought, talking to a friend could be just as good. "But will you be able to get the poster ready in time, Grasshopper?" Nisha asked.

"I'll get it done, Lady. You can trust me. I'll have it up by 4:30, I promise. You don't even need to come check on it. Just show up for the party, okay. You've done your part. Now you can relax. Noor aunty will give me access to the building. Just update your friend in the building, so she knows what's going on, as she has taken full responsibility for the party."

"Okay, Rohan. This is a good thing. It will help Asif recover. I'll be there a little after five. Cherian will be coming with me, so I can't come earlier. But I trust

you. I'll let Priya know and I'll send you her contact number. Best of luck. See you in the evening."

At The Party

It was a quarter past five when Nisha arrived at the party with Raj and Cherian. There were already quite a few people there. The party was on the podium level in the open space next to the gym, facing the half of the swimming pool protruding beyond the front of the gym. The tall buildings obstructed the view of the rough tiled walkway Saloni had crashed onto. A long buffet table covered in white linen stretched out beyond the edge of the swimming pool. Priya had worked with Sachi's team and arranged for a stage along the perimeter wall facing the gym, where people could come and say a few words about Saloni. Several rows of chairs spanned the space between the gym and the stage.

Rohan had done a grand job with the poster, which included a collage of pictures of Saloni with various friends. Nisha had forwarded to Rohan, the pictures Ankita, Ajit, Mandira and Sachi's assistant had sent her. The poster was huge, covering the entire back wall of the stage. Rohan had added a picture of Saloni with Asif and a message in the tight, curvy, curly handwriting Nisha had no trouble recognizing.

Sparkling as you sprinted through life, you left behind a trail of joy. Your warmth and laughter infused my soul with optimism and made me soar. It's you I see, when I look at the sky.

Just as Nisha had finished reading the message, Sachi showed up. "There you are. You shouldn't be late when you're the host, you know. I did this for you and this is how..." She was on a roll, but then her eyes wandered to the people next to Nisha.

"Raj, it's been so long. I'm so glad you came. I thought you hated these things," she smiled.

"What can I do? The boss lady insisted." Raj winked, and Nisha frowned. "I hope there is some good food," he looked around sniffing for aromas.

"I did not arrange for the food, so I am sure it's good." Sachi laughed. "And is that you Cherian? That is a gorgeous saree. Pink suits you well. You look so pretty with your hair down, I almost did not recognize you." Cherian scowled. "That's more like it. Now I have no trouble recognizing you." She winked and patted Cherian on the shoulder, and then pointed the three of them to a row of empty seats. "Priya will be here soon. She had to iron out a few kinks with the caterers."

Nisha looked around for a moment. Ajit, Mandira and Ankita were all seated together on the first row, right in front of the stage, presumably because they would all be talking. An older man was sitting a few seats away from them. "Isn't that Pramod Tiwari?" Nisha asked, recognizing him from the time he had yelled at Asif.

"Yup. That's Saloni's dad." Sachi nodded. "Should I introduce you?"

Nisha looked at Raj. "Go, go," he waved her off. "We're here so you can solve the mystery, Dear. I promise I won't feel abandoned. Besides, I have Cherian for company."

"Yes, please go. I have no desire to talk to that man again, anyway. Besides, you won't get much out of him, if I am with you. And I am counting on you to help me solve this mystery. You owe me, you know." Cherian reminded her. Nisha nodded and followed Sachi as she headed towards Pramod Tiwari.

"Hello Mr. Tiwari," Sachi went up to the man and smiled.

"Oh hello, Sachi Mehra, right? Are you still scaring people with your interviews?"

"I can't even scare my own daughter these days. She's in college, you see." Sachi sighed.

"You must enjoy her company while you still can. Take it from a dad who learned the hard way, no matter what they do, it's not worth staying mad at them." His eyes teared up.

"I am so sorry Sir, for your loss. By all accounts, Saloni was a wonderful girl. You must have done something right with the way you brought her up." Sachi patted his shoulder.

"Thank you for arranging this tribute. You probably know that my daughter and I were estranged the last few years. I can't tell you how much I regret it, but it's too late to do anything about it. I am glad I was able to come here, the place where she lived so happily, to say goodbye to my precious girl." Tears gushed down his cheeks, and he made no attempt to stem them.

"I was happy to do it Mr. Tiwari, but you have my friend Nisha to thank for the location." She turned to look at Nisha standing behind her to her right. "She convinced her friends in this society to let me host it here."

Pramod Tiwari squinted as he looked at Nisha. "Thank you so much, Madam." He hesitated before adding,

"Forgive me if I am mistaken, but I get the feeling I have met you or seen you before."

Nisha smiled. "Yes, you have, at Asif's house. You were convinced he had killed your daughter, and you were very angry. I assure you, he did not."

"Oh yes, I remember now. I am very sorry and terribly ashamed. I was really very angry with myself for holding a pointless grudge against my daughter, and since the police suspected Asif of killing her, I just lashed out, venting all my anger on him. I could not bear the burden of my regret. Please convey my apologies to Mr. Mirza, and I will do so in person when he has recovered."

"Mr. Tiwari, what happened between you and your daughter?" Nisha asked, unable to restrain herself.

"Please, I cannot talk about that. I just can't, I can't." He wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I am sorry to press you like this, but do you have the slightest idea who might have killed her?" Nisha persisted, as gently as she could manage.

"It was me. I abandoned her, kicked her out of my house, let her think I did not love her anymore. Her death is my fault. I failed her, and I failed my dead wife." He banged his fist on the neighboring chair.

"Please Sir, don't you want to know who actually did this?" Nisha bit her lip and clenched her fists in despair.

"Does it really matter? Will that bring my baby back to me? I can never make things right with her." Tears gushed down his cheeks. "I lost my wife through no fault of mine. Busy as I was, I devoted myself to my daughter. She was my princess, and she adored me. We had a wonderful relationship for over a decade and a half, always supporting each other, being there for each other. I thought I had it all. Professional success, and a small but perfect family. Then, the very first time my daughter really needed me, I failed her. It would never have happened, if her mother was there. She would have made us both understand and fixed everything. But I was too stupid. I was shocked and upset, and then my pride was hurt. But I won't ruin things for her, now. She's dead, and she deserves peace," he said, glancing at the trio of youngsters seated a few chairs away.

Sachi was already up on the podium welcoming everyone. Nisha realized she wasn't going to get more out of Pramod. But why had he looked at the three youngsters? Did he suspect Ajit too? Did he know that Ajit was her lover? Perhaps, he had managed to keep tabs on the two of them. But why would he want to keep the relationship a secret? It made no sense. There

was nothing embarrassing about them dating. They were age compatible, and Ajit wasn't her boss. Pramod may have been a protective dad, but why hide the relationship now, especially if disclosing it could help catch her killer? Nisha looked at the poster again. *My brilliant plan to prove Ajit was the murderer*, she thought, bitterness clouding her expression as she made her way towards Cherian and Raj.

Pramod Tiwari was now on stage talking about his daughter. Nisha felt sorry for him. So often we hold on to our anger for silly reasons and lose out on precious time to make memories. She resolved to call her children that night. It had been a while since she had spoken to them. Her son Tanush had got married to his girlfriend of three years a few months ago. Nisha and Raj had gone to the US to celebrate the occasion in an intimate ceremony, where their extended family had all got together, but Nisha and her children had hardly spoken since then. They had all been immersed in the nitty-gritties of everyday life.

Your smile will live on in our hearts. In our artificial world of acting, we often forget who we really are. Your open and natural attitude was a welcome breath of fresh air. I had hoped that someday, we would get to know each other better. But now I am reminded, life is too short to care about what other people think. In the words of the Bard, 'to thine own self be true'.

Nisha read Ajit's message on the poster once she sat down next to Cherian. Raj had taken the left most seat of the third row, and Cherian was seated next to him. She was about to get up and move one seat over, so Nisha could sit next to Raj, but Nisha pushed her down. "No, sit, I may need to get up again," Nisha said plonking down on Cherian's right. The remaining five chairs in that row on Nisha's right were empty. Ajit had written mostly what he had told Nisha about Saloni, except that he had left out the part about her distaste for sex scenes. The handwriting bore little resemblance to the one in the letters, Nisha had to admit. Blown up to such a large size, it was now undeniably clear. The poster did not serve it's purpose, but it was a nice to have in the tribute ceremony.

Nisha was just about to start reading Mandira's message, when she recalled something. There was still that one line of investigation left. "Hey Cherian," she whispered tapping her on the shoulder. "Were you able to find out anything about her second phone? Do you know who she had called around noon the day she died? Mandira said she called someone just before leaving the studio."

Cherian shook her head. "Her bank records showed she paid a bill for a second phone. I was able to get the number form the phone company. There were no records of any calls on that phone, but her data usage

records show she did use the internet on it quite a lot. So, perhaps it was a WhatsApp call." Cherian shrugged. "But as of now, I am stuck."

Ajit was talking on stage about a TV miniseries Saloni and he had been on the supporting cast of, a couple of years ago. Nisha's eyes wandered back to the poster.

You always made everyone comfortable, and you made us all laugh. I'm going to miss you, but I hope you finally got to meet your heroine, Kalpana Chawla among the stars. Toodles, Darling.

Poor girl, just as her dreams were coming true, Nisha thought recalling her conversation with Mandira, and another aspect of that conversation flashed through her mind. "What about bills? Mandira mentioned, Saloni used the second phone for online payments. Was the phone linked to a Paytm account? Maybe you can find out what purchases she made." Nisha suggested.

"I looked into that too because of what you said," Cherian snapped her fingers. "But no leads there either." She shook her head and shrugged. "She definitely did not link it to any payment platform. From what I can tell, I doubt she used it for anything except WhatsApp, and possibly to take pictures and videos."

Nisha squinted and took a deep breath. Was this the phone Saloni used to communicate with her secret lover? Cherian had already told her the phone they recovered from her did not have any messages that suggested a secret romantic relationship. There were a few pictures of Saloni with Asif which were already on social media, and a few others taken with colleagues at the studio cafeteria, or in restaurants. Nisha simply did not understand this cloak and dagger stuff. What could she be so embarrassed about? Was it something she just did for thrills? No, that couldn't be, or either her dad or lover would have said something.

Perhaps, I should have another chat with Ankita, Nisha thought. Of all the people she had met so far, besides Pramod Tiwari, Ankita had known Saloni for the longest. They were friends, though Nisha couldn't tell how close. Was Ankita just grateful to Saloni, or a close confidant too? It wasn't easy to tell. That girl was quite reserved. When Pramod Tiwari had looked at the trio, was he looking at Ankita perhaps, and not Ajit? He knew Ankita from the days she trained Saloni in his house, Ankita had indicated.

Did Ankita know something of Saloni's love life? Had she been sworn to secrecy? What could be so embarrassing or damaging that no one wanted to speak of it, even after Saloni had been murdered? Then, a sudden thought occurred to Nisha. *Could*

Saloni have been having an affair with a married man?

As she contemplated this new possibility, she kicked herself. She certainly wasn't a very good detective. Why hadn't she thought of it before? The theory of Saloni's dad's protectiveness had thrown her off the obvious track. But who could this person be, and in the building with so much surveillance, how did he slip in regularly under the radar? Or was he someone who lived in the building?

"Is this seat taken?" A woman tapped Nisha on her shoulder, startling her out of her reverie. She was pointing to the seat to the right of Nisha.

"No. No." Nisha said gathering herself. "Please feel free to take it." Ajit had stopped speaking, she noted. Mandira was now reminiscing Saloni as her mentor. The woman, and a man, presumably her husband, sat down on the two empty chairs on Nisha's right.

"Hello, I am Ranjana Mukherjee and this is my husband Alok." The woman smiled. "Saloni was our neighbor. What a dear girl." She shook her head sadly.

Alok Mukherjee! Nisha's heart skipped a beat. "Yes, very sad." Nisha nodded and clicked her tongue, while her brain was on overdrive. Alok Mukherjee was an

AM too. Could this be the married man? Why had he been overlooked? Cherian had mentioned something about an alibi. Oh yes, the movies she vaguely recalled. Cherian had dismissed them because their alibi was rock solid. But that was before she had seen those letters.

How were movies a rock solid alibi, anyway? Husband and wife vouching for each other was plain stupid. Maybe, Ranjana had found out about the affair when she noticed a message from Saloni asking her husband to come over that afternoon. She may have deleted the message and then knocked on Saloni's door at the time Saloni had invited her husband. Saloni must have opened the door expecting her lover. Seeing Ranjana, she may have been shocked, but willing to let her in to avoid a scene. Then Ranjana could have lured her to the balcony under some pretext, thrown her over the glass railing and coolly gone home. Yes, that must be it. Nisha's eyes lit up with excitement.

Mandira had finished with her tribute to Saloni, and Sachi was urging people to go to the buffet counter and help themselves to some of Saloni's favorite foods. "I'm going to get something to eat." Raj told Nisha.

"I'll join you in a few minutes Raj. I need to talk to Cherian first." Nisha pulled Cherian aside.

"What is it? You bring me to the party, but you won't let me eat in peace." Cherian grumbled.

"Stop whining. There is plenty of time to eat. But first listen to me." Nisha shared her theory about Alok.

"Why didn't you tell me he was an AM? And how could you fall for such a weak alibi?" she complained.

"Will you let me get a word in?" Cherian glared. "I am not a novice at this, you know. I have been doing this for a few years. I said their alibi was rock solid, because it is. They went to the movies with friends who vouch for them, and even shared pictures and selfies they took there together." Cherian blinked away her tears.

"Cherian, I'm sorry. You have experience, but I am a novice. I fancied myself a detective, and got carried away. I thought I had a brilliant idea and wanted to be right." Nisha looked down, and her shoulders stooped.

"Hey, you're pretty good for a novice. You've saved two innocent people so far. But I wish you wouldn't treat me this way. I thought I had earned your respect."

"You have, Cherian. I'll try to be less stupid. Come on now, let's go get some food together. As they walked

over to the buffet table, they noticed Asif and Noor. They had just arrived, and Asif was carrying his guitar. "Hello Noor. Hi Asif." Nisha greeted the duo.

"Hello Nisha. Thanks for your advice. Asif has been telling me all about Saloni. He wants to perform her favorite song here, for closure. Your friends Priya and Sachi were very kind to accommodate him." Noor beamed. Her eyes fell on Cherian. "Thank you, Madam. Nisha has told me how helpful you were in saving my son."

"Just doing my job." Cherian smiled. "At least, someone appreciates me," she added narrowing her eyes at Nisha.

Nisha rolled her eyes. "I look forward to your performance Asif." She smiled.

"Hello, Asif. I was so glad to hear you were cleared of all charges. Saloni was very fond of you. I knew it couldn't be you, no matter what the police or anyone said." Nisha turned around and saw Ankita, who edged closer to Asif, grasped his hand and squeezed it, her face beaming with joy, or was it relief, Nisha wondered.

"Thank you." Asif smiled.

"That's very kind of you to say, Miss Mehta," Noor added.

"Oh, hello, Nisha." Ankita smiled, noticing Nisha for the first time. "You still haven't given me that form." Ankita wagged her finger, sternly.

"Sorry, I've been really busy. I'll give it to you by Monday," Nisha promised, feeling simultaneously annoyed and embarrassed. *Is this is how Rohan feels when I pester him*, Nisha wondered, and decided to be more considerate in future.

Asif, Noor and Cherian exchanged amused smiles, but quickly straightened their faces when they noticed Nisha looking at them. "I need to go set up for my performance." Asif made to move towards the stage. Then, he abruptly turned back and gave Nisha a hug. "Thanks so much for everything," he whispered, and dashed off towards the stage rubbing away flecks of tears. Noor and Nisha exchanged smiles.

"Come on." Cherian pulled Nisha by her arm. "Let's get something to eat before all the good stuff is over."

"Okay, okay." Nisha agreed, and the two of them joined Raj who was already helping himself to dessert. "What's good, Raj?" Nisha asked.

"The *chole bature* is excellent. Look there's a guy making fresh *baturas*. And the *paneer tikka* with capsicum is delicious." Raj recommended, savoring his *rabdi jalebi*.

"Enjoy pigging out," Nisha smiled helping herself to some *chole bature*. "But tomorrow, we go back to our diet," she reminded Raj.

"Ooh, I see *pav bhaji*," Cherian announced and darted off to help herself to some. Raj and Nisha smiled at each other. Just then Ajit and Mandira walked over. "You have a promise to keep," Ajit began.

"Well hello to you too," Nisha chirped, "and look who is here." Sachi appeared as if on cue, and Nisha introduced Mandira and Ajit to her. The enthusiastic youngsters at once engaged her in conversation.

"She's not going to be allowed to surface for a while." Nisha laughed.

"And then there were two." Raj remarked.

"My favorite two," Nisha said pinching some dessert from Raj's plate.

"Hey, go get your own. I'm not sharing." Raj frowned.

"Okay, okay, I will."

Nisha was on her way to the dessert counter, when Priya caught up with her. "So have you solved the mystery yet?"

"No, but the food is awesome, Priya." Nisha mumbled through a mouth full of *paneer*.

"Thanks. The caterers, the society uses, are pretty good. But we had some misunderstanding regarding the menu. I had asked for a live *chaat* counter. But the food is good, so I guess it's fine. I'm glad you managed to exonerate Asif, though. Abhay was really worried about him. He needs help." Priya observed.

Nisha helped herself to a large slice of rich chocolate cake. "Yes, I'm so relieved that he can recover safely at home. Noor and he seem to be getting closer too. I believe he is performing something today."

Nisha and Priya both looked towards the podium, where the technicians had all just finished setting up for Asif to perform. "I just wish I could figure out who really tried to kill the girl," Nisha sighed, looking at the joyful picture of Saloni on the poster at the back of the stage. Nisha had asked Cherian for that one, after Ajit had told her about it, and Rohan too had appreciated it enough to make it the most prominent one in the collage. Nisha recalled Ajit telling her it was a photograph only a lover could have taken. Nisha

knew exactly what he had meant. Those bright sparkling eyes and little smile with joy bubbling over, spoke at once of a mingling of ecstasy and longing.

Nisha and Priya walked back to the chairs together, but as Nisha sat down next to Raj and Cherian, Priya proceeded to the row in front to sit next to Abhay. "Oh this chocolate cake is divine," Nisha licked the frosting off her fingers experiencing a different kind of joy, the kind she associated with well made chocolate, a delicate balance of bitter, sweet and creamy.

Asif had already started strumming his guitar, and all was quiet. Rohan came and sat down on the chair Cherian had just vacated on Nisha's left. "Is the poster okay?" he asked.

"Perfect!" Nisha whispered. Rohan smiled, and ran back to sit with Asif's parents. Nisha's eyes wandered over to the last message. She had been wanting to read what Ankita had written, hoping it might offer some new insights into the case. As she read a few sentences something really bothered her. But she couldn't figure out what. She had a distinct feeling it was very important, perhaps even the key to this case, but it kept eluding her.

The words seemed to blend into the music Asif was strumming. They seemed to be made for each other.

Of course, Nisha thought, as she read through the words taking in their meaning.

My angel friend, I miss you so,

Indebted to you, I hope you know,

for myself I found in walking with you.

Explore, discover, learn and grow,

I'll stretch my wings until I soar,

and when my halo starts to glow, hallelujah.

Asif had said long ago that he thought *Hallelujah* was Saloni's favorite song, and that she often played it in the afternoons. That's probably why Ankita had decided to write a verse from it as her message. But could these really be the words of the song? The theme seemed to fit what Rohan had said about the song, biblical with an undercurrent of sensual. She couldn't put her finger on it, but the soaring, the glowing halo, was somehow evocative of something. What? An orgasm? She decided to listen to the lyrics Asif had just started singing. Nisha was startled by his powerful and deep voice. A *fall back option*, she thought, if engineering did not work out for him.

It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth

The minor falls, the major lifts

The baffled king composing Hallelujah

She listened to every verse attentively, but none of the lyrics matched what Ankita had written. *Does Ankita use this as a workout song*, Nisha wondered and decided to scroll through the playlist she had sent her. After all, Ankita had suggested that Saloni could have been exercising in the attire she was found dead in. But the list did not include this song, and Asif was sure he had heard Saloni play the song just an hour or so before she was killed.

Nisha pulled up the lyrics to the song on Google. No, the paragraph definitely wasn't taken from the song. Perhaps, she had composed it herself in the style of the song. Nisha read it again. Of course. That made more sense. Ankita did feel indebted to Saloni for helping her set up her business. The sexual undercurrent was simply in keeping with the style of the song. Very clever.

Nisha had lost track of what was going on. But the sound of those words being sung by a haunting, soul penetrating voice startled her out of her musings. Ankita was on the podium with Asif, and she was singing her heart out while he played the guitar, both their faces soaked in tears. Later, Nisha learned that

Asif had invited her to come on stage and sing the verse she had written for Saloni on the poster.

"Thank you Miss Mehta," Asif said, trying to keep his voice from breaking, and returned the mike to Sachi who was back on stage.

Nisha suddenly knew what had disturbed her so deeply about Ankita's message. She browsed through the files on her phone desperately searching for the right one. It was there, right under her nose. What a dummy she had been, but the answer would no longer elude her. She had finally figured it out. Hallelujah indeed. She had been stupid, blind to the truth because of her own prejudices. But now she knew.

Now, everything made loads of sense. Saloni's choosing Asif for a boyfriend, the fight between Saloni and her dad, the reason her dad did not want the letters to become public, how he knew that his daughter had never had sex with Asif, Saloni's need to hide her true lover and the stuff Ajit had said about her distaste for sex scenes, what Rohan had said about the song, and the last time Asif had heard it through the common wall between his and Saloni's apartments, all fell into place, as Nisha saw the complete picture of the jigsaw puzzle. *Almost complete*, she thought, for now she understood who, but not why.

Saved by the Bell

Nisha looked around to see where everyone was. Ajit and Mandira were still talking to a couple of journalists Sachi had introduced them to. Sachi was near the stage waiting for one of the minor celebrities who had known Saloni to finish their speech eulogizing her. Ankita was talking to Pramod Tiwari. Asif and Noor were talking to Priya and Abhay. Cherian, in her *gulabi* sari, was gobbling *gulab jamuns* at the buffet counter. In spite of her excitement, Nisha took a moment to enjoy the sight of Cherian's cheeks puffed out, as she chomped on the delightfully soft and rich dessert. A trickle of the sticky syrup had escaped the corner of her lips and ran down her chin. "Here," Nisha smiled, handing Cherian a paper napkin.

"Thanks," Cherian replied after swallowing. She dabbed her chin and wiped her sticky fingers with the napkin.

Nisha told Cherian her theory. "I know I've proposed a lot of these today, and you have no reason to believe me anymore, but I really think I am right this time."

Cherian scratched her chin. "It's farfetched, but I must admit, it does hold together, and explain most of the

evidence, but it's not enough." She looked around at the guests, carefully noting what they were doing.
"Wait, I have an idea. I have a feeling we may just get lucky."

Cherian pulled out her cellphone from a little pink purse slung over her shoulder, and began scrolling through some numbers on WhatsApp. "There it is," she mumbled before tapping.

"What are you doing?" Nisha asked.

"Seeing if this is your lucky day." Cherian's eyes repeatedly scanned the various guests.

"Gotcha!" Cherian exclaimed, as a faint ringing sound reached their ears.

"You were right, I think." Cherian said, pointing at Pramod Tiwari holding the ringing phone. "But I can't believe the sim card is still in the phone. That's stupid. Well, it seems like it is your lucky day." She disconnected the call.

"Wow!" Nisha couldn't believe it. So she knew the who for sure, but the why still made absolutely no sense.

"What now?" Cherian asked.

"You know, since you're not in uniform and looking uncharacteristically pretty," Nisha winked and Cherian scowled, "they may not recognize you as the policewoman who talked to them earlier. You come along, but let me do the talking, so they don't recognize you by your style of speaking. Let's see what we can find out unofficially," Nisha suggested. Cherian nodded.

Nisha walked up to Ankita and Pramod, with Cherian in her shadow. "Hello Ankita. I see you finally had a chance to catch up with Pramod."

"Yes, Ankita has been kind enough to share some anecdotes from the last few years of my daughter's life. I missed so much, and all because of my stupid pride. It's really very kind of her."

"Yes, she did know Saloni better than anyone else, I think. I read your message for Saloni, Ankita. So beautiful and heartfelt. I wasn't aware that you're a poet too." Nisha beamed.

"I'm not. I just tried to mimic the style of her favorite song." Ankita blushed.

"This is the first time I heard it, you know, when Asif played it. It's beautiful. How fortunate, that Saloni at least got to hear it one last time, just an hour before

she died." Nisha turned her gaze towards Pramod. "Knowing that should bring you some measure of comfort. But I suppose you already knew." Nisha looked Pramod in the eye.

"What? How would I know that?" Pramod Tiwari goggled at Nisha. "What are you trying to say?"

"Mr. Tiwari, you know who your daughter's secret lover, AM is. That's why you used all your considerable influence to suppress the letters." Nisha bored into his eyes with the intensity of a basilisk.

"Of course, I don't. How should I know? I just didn't want a scandal besmirching my daughter's good name. That's why I suppressed them. She deserves to rest in peace."

"Why would her having a boyfriend be a scandal? It's quite normal for someone single and her age, isn't it?" Nisha persisted.

"The letters were erotic, and that always makes for scandal. I need to put this behind me, not have her reputation muddied in the cesspool that is social media." Pramod began to sound irritated.

"So the reason you were trying to hide the letters has nothing to do with the fact that they were written by Ankita Mehta?" Nisha whispered.

"What?" Pramod barked and Ankita gasped. Nisha pointed to the message on the poster. "Does that handwriting look familiar?"

Ankita froze, as her eyes widened in terror. "You were her lover, weren't you? You were the reason her father abandoned her?" Nisha hammered on. "Whats more, you weren't out shopping. You were with her that afternoon. Did you kill her?" Nisha glared at Ankita with pitiless eyes.

"No." Ankita pleaded. "No. I did not. I couldn't. You must believe me. Please," she begged clasping her hands in desperation.

Pramod Tiwari gently pulled Ankita away and stepped between her and Nisha. "Madam, I appreciate everything you are trying to do. I have already lost my daughter and squandered precious time I could have spent with her through my own foolishness. I will not let you also badger her good friend. You have no idea what you're talking about, and you have no proof." He glared at Nisha defiantly.

Just then the phone Ankita was holding started ringing. She was so startled, she almost dropped it. "All the proof I need is in there. That phone belongs to Saloni, and it was taken away from her at the time of the murder." Nisha asserted.

"I will be taking that." Cherian finally emerged from behind Nisha.

"It's you." Pramod goggled at Cherian, recognizing her for the first time at the party. His shoulders slumped, and he looked tired. "Fine, can we go somewhere private, so we have a chance to explain? Do what you like after that."

Cherian nodded. "I have the key to Saloni's apartment. Why don't we talk there?"

Nisha and Cherian led the way. "Come, my dear. It will be alright." Pramod reassured Ankita, and she followed.

Case Closed

Nisha looked around the living room of the apartment. In front of the main door, an empty rectangular glass top coffee table with a thin layer of dust, was surrounded by large cane rocking chairs along each of its four sides. Each of the chairs, had a thick, fluffy, colorful, patchwork quilt draped over them. It was a very cozy set up. But behind the chair facing the door was the french window leading to the balcony from which Saloni had descended to her death. The thought gave Nisha goosebumps.

A circular mahogany dining table with four matching chairs occupied the other half of the room. A narrow *diwan* stretched along the wall between the sitting and dining area. Opposite it, was a wall mounted large flat screen TV. On the mantelpiece under the TV, were several little knickknacks and a smaller version of the photograph that Nisha had seen at the party. It was indeed the one Ajit had talked about. "Did you take that picture?" Nisha asked, when she saw Ankita looking at it with desperate longing in her eyes.

"Yes," Ankita nodded, her tears flowing freely. She had shut her eyes tightly to avoid a glimpse of the balcony as she had entered, Nisha had noticed. Even

with her eyes closed, she had made her way to the *diwan* with ease, Nisha noted. She knew her way around the place well, like she had been here often.

The walls were lined with a variety of paintings of landscapes, seascapes and one of the night sky. A few were signed with the initials AM. "You paint well." Nisha tried to comfort Ankita.

"She was so eager to get that Kalpana Chawla role. That's when I painted the night sky for her. Imagine having your dreams come true and then..." Ankita shook her head in dismay.

"Why did you kill her?" Cherian demanded.

"I didn't. I didn't." Ankita howled like a wounded animal.

"That's enough." Pramod growled. "Just show them what they need to see, Ankita."

Ankita nodded through her tears. She trembled as she searched for something on Saloni's second phone. After a few minutes of fumbling, she handed the phone to Nisha.

Cherian came over to look. Ankita had selected a video file for them to see. Nisha clicked play, and the two watched mesmerized.

Saloni was at the balcony standing next to a stool. She was dressed in the skimpy attire they had found her broken body in. "That was the best sex ever, Anki. I love you, Baby. First the news about me playing Kalpana Chawla, and then my best orgasm ever. I'm flying." She took a large gulp from a half empty wine glass. "Here get this on video," she said, giggling as she placed the wine glass on the floor and climbed onto the stool, still facing the camera. She stretched out her arms and flapped them. "Do I look like I'm flying?" she asked wobbling a little and clearly tipsy.

"Saloni be careful!" came Ankita's startled voice, as the video shook. "Don't!"

But Saloni was already leaning outward, her back curved into a graceful arch. She was the picture of beauty and joy. "Adjust the camera, so the balcony rail is not visible. I want to look like I'm flying in the clear blue sky." Saloni demanded.

"Saloni, this is dangerous!" Ankita shouted.

"Relax, will you? I know dad is embarrassed about me being a lesbian, but this will make him proud. I'm going to be Kalpana Chawla." She pushed herself up on her tiptoes, and toppled backward over the balcony glass, arms still stretched out wide. Nisha and Cherian gasped, and Pramod whimpered. *When you're happy*

and you know it ... Nisha grimaced at her own morbid thought.

"She said it was my fault. If only I had some sense. How could I be so embarrassed about something that brought her so much joy? I loved her, but I was a fool." Pramod banged his fist on the dining table.

"But why didn't you just show us this video to start with?" Cherian stared at Ankita, completely baffled.

"She wanted to keep her secret and Saloni's too. That's why she wiped her prints, washed the glass, took the phone and retreated. She left the building by the stairs and returned to the scene only an hour later." Nisha explained.

"You don't know how hard it is to be a lesbian couple. You don't understand. It would affect our careers and neither of us were ready to deal with the trolling and judgment, especially Saloni, given that she was a public figure." Ankita's tears had stopped, but her haunted expression made her look like a ghost. "I was so upset, but I was also scared that our relationship would be exposed. So I grabbed the evidence and dashed off. After Pramod saw the letters, he got in touch with me. He said he really regretted his attitude towards our relationship. We have been working on our grief together, ever since."

"So this was just an accident. I've been chasing ghosts. A boy almost died." Cherian complained. "Anyway, this video will solve everything."

"You can't use the video," Pramod Tiwari stood threateningly over Cherian. "It will cause Ankita a lot of grief, and as you can clearly see, she is completely innocent."

"Don't you tell me what I can and cannot do! You've been obstructing justice, both of you. You will be implicated too." Cherian fumed.

"I don't care what you do to me. But I will protect her. Dragging her through mud for no fault of hers is not justice." Pramod shouted.

"Fine, then I'll use the handwriting evidence to start a case against Ankita." Cherian retorted, her face red with rage.

"You can't do that. You know the truth. Spare her, please." Pramod begged.

"Then I need the video," Cherian insisted.

Nisha realized Pramod was driving Cherian to dig her heels. She did not like being pushed around. Pramod was doing this all wrong. Nisha wanted to help

Ankita, but she knew from experience, that an aggressive approach would never work with Cherian.

"Cherian," Nisha interrupted. "I understand that you need the video for evidence, but can't we leave Ankita out of it? Would you consider a compromise?"

"What?" Cherian barked. Pramod eyed Nisha with curiosity, and Ankita with hope.

"What if you got your IT labs to check the authenticity of the video, and then separate the video and audio files? Then you can turn in just the video file for evidence. Neither file would be tampered with, only separated, and that too by your people. The video file alone gives you all the evidence you need, and does not disclose the information Ankita would rather keep private. Is that acceptable?"

"But the procedure you are suggesting is expensive, especially since we will have to get an external consultant." Cherian objected. "It's not standard procedure, and an unfair burden on tax payers."

"I will cover the costs, personally. Saloni and Ankita both deserve their privacy, and Ankita deserves to come out of the closet on her own terms. No crime was committed here, so please accept this reasonable compromise." Pramod pleaded.

"Okay." Cherian relented. "Mind you, I will have to clear this with my bosses, but I will try my best to convince them, and I think they will agree given that there was no crime at all. We need to focus our limited resources where it counts."

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Cherian." Nisha smiled. Cherian nodded.

Another Party

This time the party was a more intimate gathering at Nisha's house. She had ordered loads of *chaat* from a nearby restaurant. Reshma had made *nimbu paani* and cut up cucumber and carrot sticks for everyone. Nisha herself had made dessert, a cinnamon raisin bread pudding, whose aroma currently filled the house with a feeling of optimism.

The guest list included Priya, Sachi, Rohan and Cherian, for without them, Nisha would never have figured out the truth. Priya had been longing for *chaat* ever since Saloni's tribute party, so Nisha had decided to indulge her. She had invited Ankita, Pramod, Asif and Noor, hoping they would be able to talk to each other and heal from the trauma of the past few weeks. She also wanted them to meet the people who has helped set their lives straight.

Noor had been very angry with Ankita. "I could have lost my son because of your selfishness," she had shouted.

Nisha had insisted on being there, when Ankita told Noor what had happened.

Asif had looked at Ankita with excruciating pain in his eyes, but he had not said a word.

"Noor," Nisha had intervened, "You have every right to be angry, but please tap into your compassion. Ankita was distraught and terrified. Besides, if you think that as a Muslim you're targeted by neighbors and trolled on social media, imagine how she feels. No one even talks about what she is in most places. She feels isolated and scared belonging to such an extremely marginalized group. She has no idea how coming out into the open will impact her life, her friendships, and her career. She saw how the truth ruined Saloni's relationship with her dad, after they had been so close for so long. To be forced to admit to it under such unpleasant circumstances, was too much for her."

"And what about Asif? Did she not care about his suffering?" Noor had demanded.

"Please Noor, she was in a bad place. She had just seen her best friend and lover dying. She could not grieve properly. Living a lie added to her psychological strain and led her to make some choices that were not brave. Can't you try to understand her?" Nisha had pleaded.

Noor had maintained a stubborn silence, but that's when Asif had spoken. "I suffered, but it wasn't your fault Ankita. I would have appreciated you telling the truth when I needed it most, but I understand why you failed. I have made a few bad choices too, off late." He had looked at his mother.

"Yes." Noor had nodded. "Ankita, I understand, and I too should have been more compassionate with Asif. I need to learn from my mistakes. All of us made mistakes, and we all need to heal. Perhaps, you can accompany us for one of our therapy sessions," Noor had suggested. Ankita had nodded vigorously.

And now, here they all were, together. "Have you had a chance to go for a session together?" Nisha asked the trio.

"Yes." Noor nodded, handing Nisha a large pot of *biryani*. "We still have a long way to go, but it felt good."

"I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I don't feel terribly lonely anymore." Ankita smiled, as she looked at Noor and Asif. "Pramod too has been very supportive. I think we both need each other." She waved at Pramod, who was talking to Sachi.

"Well, then I think we all need some *chaat*." Nisha declared and gestured towards the dining table.

"Looks like we have some mouth watering *biryani* too," she added raising the large pot to loud cheers.

"And since I've started exercising regularly under your guidance, I don't even feel guilty about this," Nisha whispered to Ankita and winked.

"Good job, Lady." Rohan congratulated Nisha. "You did even better than I thought you would. You helped a lot of people. Aren't you glad I brought you this mystery?"

"Oh no, no, Grasshopper. You're not going to get to spin it that way. I did you a favor, remember?" Nisha wagged her finger.

"If you say so, Lady." He waggled his eyebrows and smiled. "Until our next mystery, then." He shouted, raising a *golgappa* into the air, before stuffing it into his mouth.

"Hear, hear!" everyone chanted in chorus, mimicking his action. Even though the *golgappas* were not particularly spicy, Nisha felt steam coming out of her ears. *Drat that Grasshopper*, she thought.

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