

# Emerging Identity



By Kanika G

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## Death and Demise

"Murder! What are you talking about? It was an accident. I mean, even if you think she could have been a little more careful, you still can't call it murder." Nisha fumed, pushing back a stray curl that had disengaged from her ponytail. "I bet you haven't even bothered to find out the whole story. As usual, you're jumping to conclusions." Nisha glared at Head Constable Cherian from across the dining table, in her tenth floor apartment in suburban Mumbai.

Their interactions had been rocky ever since Cherian had tried to beat a confession out of Nisha's maid, Reshma, in a theft case almost a year ago. Nisha had not only proved Reshma's innocence, but also found the actual culprit. The last time Nisha and Cherian had locked horns on the same case, they had developed a tiny bit of mutual respect. At the moment, Nisha felt that respect rapidly fading.

Cherian bit back an angry retort. She took a deep breath to calm herself before she spoke. "I think Madam, you'll find that you're the one who is jumping to conclusions this time," she said. Nisha was temporarily dumbstruck by Cherian's unexpected restraint. "May I explain the situation to you?" Cherian continued.

Nisha nodded, as Reshma brought in two cups of steaming tea and a plate of biscuits. Cherian thanked Reshma, but still found it difficult to meet her eyes. Reshma, who hadn't yet forgiven Cherian, left quickly. Nisha noticed their awkward interaction, but refrained from commenting on it. Cherian was trying, so she decided to be more amiable. "So you were saying," she prompted, taking a sip of her tea.

Encouraged, Cherian got straight to the point. "I need your help to solve a murder case, and before you go all ballistic on me again, let me assure you, it's not what you think it is."

Nisha narrowed her eyes and then nodded, urging her to continue.

### ***Four months ago ...***

"Good-heavens! Whatever is that?" Nisha exclaimed, as Rohan dropped a jute bag down on the floor with a thud.

"My inline skates," Rohan replied, his eyes lighting up. "They're new. I'm going to meet Asif after class, and we will skate together."

Asif lived in the neighboring housing society. Rohan and he were best of friends. It was only a month ago that Rohan had pestered Nisha to help Asif out of a

tight spot. During the course of that case, Nisha and Cherian had eventually worked together and got to know each other better.

Nisha had enjoyed two adventures mimicking her fictional heroine Miss Marple, but professionally she was a teacher. She had taught Physics at the university for several years, before a woman in her building had begged Nisha to tutor her college-going son. Nisha had found the one-on-one tutoring experience more enjoyable and lucrative than teaching a class. So, a few years ago, she had quit her job at the university and begun tutoring high school and college kids at home in math, physics and chemistry. Her new schedule opened up her mornings for leisure, while the afternoons were reserved for tutoring.

Rohan, a tall, lanky boy with messy hair, was dressed in a T-shirt and track pants as usual. "You got them from the Adidas website?" Nisha asked, aware of his fanatic fondness for the brand. Everything from his headband to shoes, and even backpack sported the Adidas logo.

"No," Rohan's shoulders drooped. "I got them from Decathalon. It's the best place to get inline skates in India."

"Oh, never mind, you can buy some Adidas socks to make up for it," Nisha consoled. Rohan glared at her,

unable to decide if she was mocking him.

Co-incidentally, that day, Nisha was supposed to be teaching Rohan about moment of inertia. He usually attended math classes with Nisha, but he was finding the rotational motion chapters in physics unusually difficult, so Nisha had offered to help him out. The very first page of the chapter in the *Fundamentals of Physics* textbook by Halliday, Resnick and Walker displayed a photo of an ice-skater pulling in her arms to increase her rotational speed.

Rohan's skates and the photograph of the graceful figure skater rekindled Nisha's childhood fantasies of learning ice-skating. Decades ago, she had watched with fascination, as the Olympic contestants gracefully slid across the ice displaying bizarre yet mesmerizing feats of balance and flexibility. At that moment, Nisha made up her mind. She too would learn inline skating. It wasn't quite as enchanting as ice-skating, nevertheless a step in the right direction. Nisha knew most inline skaters were able to transition to ice-skating quite easily. So if ever the opportunity ever presented itself, Nisha would be ready for it.

Her mind made up, Nisha wondered where she could learn. Her own, over a decade old housing society compound was overrun with parked vehicles. The builders had grossly underestimated the requirement

for parking spaces. So Nisha scoured the internet in search of a rollerblading rink, but it wasn't easy to find a skating rink in suburban Mumbai. Nisha, however, was adamant. She wondered if she too could skate in the neighboring housing society, like Rohan. But why would they allow her? She wasn't a kid who had a friend living there. She brooded over the problem for a few days, and then the solution came to her during one of her work out sessions with her personal trainer Ankita.

Priya Desai, Nisha's friend who lived in the neighboring housing society had introduced her to Ankita, who lived there too. Nisha begged Ankita, to help her learn inline skating. As Ankita's student, for a monthly fee, Nisha obtained permission to skate in the neighboring society at certain fixed times.

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"Lady, you're learning to skate too?" Rohan goggled at her. In fact, he was so surprised, he had almost rolled off into the pool. Asif had managed to steady him just in time.

"Careful, Grasshopper." Nisha giggled. "I'm not too old to learn something new, am I?" she added, frowning.

"I never said you were, Lady. You know how much I encourage your mystery solving skills. You're the brainiest person I know, but I never took you for the sporty type. Good for you, Lady." Rohan grinned, and Nisha beamed.

"Okay, less talking more skating," Ankita interrupted, when she came to investigate what the hold up was about. Nisha resumed her wobbly skating, while Asif and Rohan sped off expertly in the opposite direction.

Nisha scanned her beautifully landscaped surroundings. This society was built after it had become common for each household in such housing societies to own two cars. So the highrises were constructed on an elevated podium with the bottom six levels dedicated to parking. The podium level she skated on, was immediately above the parking levels and inaccessible to cars. One corner of the podium level had the society club house. The open space on the level was landscaped with gardens. The swimming pool was right outside the front entrance to the clubhouse, and beyond it was a playing field. On the other side of the club house was a children's play area, banquet hall and a small space for outdoor functions. The corner diagonally opposite the clubhouse was occupied by the highrise buildings.

A six foot wide walking path had been created along the perimeter. Although it was comfortable for walking and jogging, it was a little cramped for cycling. The society's managing committee did not permit cycling, so many residents had invested in skates and skateboards. Children often zoomed past walkers on skates or wobbled by on a fascinating new contraption, that Nisha had learned was called a waveboard.

After a month of practicing skating diligently for an hour every weekday, Nisha felt confident. Although she was not nearly as good as Rohan, which he often liked to remind her during his math class, she wasn't afraid of falling anymore and could execute fairly smooth turns. She still wasn't adept at braking, but she didn't feel the need to speed, so it didn't matter too much.

Although Nisha had been the only middle-aged skater initially, a couple of other women got inspired by her and joined in. Nisha knew them by face and usually waved at them while passing by.

Then about a month ago, the society's managing committee issued a new ordinance permitting cycling. Nisha was glad she had mastered braking by then, because some of the cyclists tended to be distracted.

There were a few close calls, but all the activities continued until ...

### ***Earlier in the morning ...***

After her husband, Rajesh, left for his office one Tuesday morning, Nisha looked forlornly at her skates. She would probably never use them again. Not after the news she had received the previous night from Priya Desai. A pity, because she was getting quite good at it too.

Nisha tore a large piece of cloth out of an old bed sheet and placed it on the dining table covering about half of it. She placed her skates on the cloth and began unscrewing the wheels. This was the first time Nisha was taking her skates apart to clean them, and sadly she thought, it would probably be the last.

Maithili. Nisha had eventually talked to one of the middle-aged women she had inspired. Although only some ten odd years younger than Nisha, Maithili, with her smooth skin, lithe body, vibrant smile, fiery passion and thick, dark, curly hair, was often mistaken for a woman in her twenties. Poor woman, Nisha thought, feeling a tad responsible as she cleaned the third wheel of her left skate. She had finally learned her name two weeks ago, soon after the dreadful incident. Now, she almost wished she hadn't.

"Didi, are you okay?" Reshma was puzzled by Nisha's pinched expression when she emerged from the kitchen.

"Oh yes. I was just thinking about the old lady in the neighboring housing society. Her funeral is in a few hours. You work at her house, right?" Nisha asked, screwing the wheels of the left skate back on, before starting on the wheels of the right skate.

"Yes Didi, I'll be going for her funeral after I leave from here." Reshma's eyes became moist. "She was very kind. I do my last job of the evening there. She was lonely, because her son and daughter-in-law would be at work for most of the day. Even her grandchildren are grown up, now. The older one lives in Delhi. He is married and has a young daughter. He came over soon after the accident for a few days. Then he returned again with his family a few days ago. The younger one started his first job a couple of years ago. He lives in America, so she hadn't seen him in over a year. But at least, she saw him once before she died. He arrived a couple of days ago to celebrate her hundredth birthday. That's tomorrow."

Nisha gasped. "Her hundredth birthday," she uttered in dismay. Things had seemed so hopeful a week ago. Nisha had even called Maithili to console her.

Everything would be okay soon, they had said to each other. How wrong they were!

"Didi, I came to tell you the *jeera* is almost finished. You need to buy some soon." Reshma spoke softly, hesitant to bring up something so mundane at a moment of such sadness. Nisha nodded and sighed. Reshma returned to the kitchen.

As Nisha cleaned the last wheel of her skates, she shuddered at the sight of a speck of blood. It took her back to the day of the awful accident. Nisha had been practicing doing U-turns, so she could skate without stopping, when she saw it all happen. It was like watching a train wreck in progress. There was nothing she could do to stop it. In fact, she even forgot she was skating. The resounding crash that followed was so loud, Nisha was startled even though she had expected it. She tumbled onto the ground. Fortunately, all her safety gear, including her helmet, elbow guards, wrist guards and knee guards, had spared her any serious injury. A mere scrape on her forearm and some stiff muscles for a week, was all she had to endure. *The speck of blood must have come from the scrape*, she mused. The victim of the crash hadn't been so lucky.

Ignoring her own injuries, Nisha had rushed off to help the two women who had collided. The memory of the ninety-nine year old frail woman lying

unconscious on the concrete, still haunted her nightmares. Nisha had fished her cellphone out of her pocket and called Priya Desai. Priya's husband Abhay was a doctor. He would be able to summon an ambulance quickly, she had hoped.

The other woman too had been sprawled across the walkway. She had managed to rise up to a sitting position when Nisha had reached the scene. "I couldn't do anything. I tried my best," she had sobbed after Nisha had ended her call.

"What's your name? Are you badly hurt?" Nisha had inquired.

"Maithili. I'm okay. But the cycle. I couldn't do a thing. I swear," she had blubbered.

"I know. I saw it all. I'm sorry." Nisha had tried to console her.

The doorbell rang drawing Nisha out of her reverie. Still holding the last wheel of her right skate, she went to answer it. Her jaw dropped when she saw who it was. "Cherian," she goggled, "in uniform?"

"Why are you so surprised to see me? I'm here to consult the local expert," Cherian winked cheerfully, as she took off her shoes. Nisha led her to the dining table. "Oh, you skate too?" Cherian raised her

eyebrows. "Excellent! Then you'll be able to help me with this investigation. You owe me you know, after all the times I've helped you."

"Exactly what am I supposed to be helping you with?" Nisha inquired, pulling up a chair to face Cherian.

A murder investigation in the next society, of course." Cherian smiled. "I thought you'd know about it already through your gossip network," she smirked, but she wasn't prepared for Nisha's explosive response.

### ***Back to the present ...***

"Do you know Maithili Sundaram?" Cherian asked dipping a biscuit in her tea.

Nisha gritted her teeth. "I've met her once and spoken to her a few times on the phone. But I tell you, it was an accident. I saw the whole thing."

"You did?" Cherian's eyes lit up.

"Yes," Nisha asserted. "Maithili was skating towards the clubhouse. There was a kid cycling towards her on her right. Maithili saw aunty walking slowly towards her on her left. She kept to the middle to avoid them both. But the kid suddenly turned his head to call out to his friend. His cycle wandered to the middle. At this

point, there was no time for Maithili to react. She swerved a little to the left to avoid the cycle. It was too late for her to brake safely. If she tried, she would most likely have injured both the child and aunty. She couldn't swerve right or she'd either crash into the cycle or go straight into the pool. She would have just about made it past aunty without hurting her, but someone had splashed pool water and the area was wet. She skidded just a little, but in that situation it was enough for her to collide with aunty. She tried her best you know." Nisha shrugged, as she blew into the cup of tea to cool it.

"You saw all of this, yourself?" Cherian asked, helping herself to another biscuit.

"Yes, I did, and I am willing to make a witness statement if required." Nisha offered.

"Have you told this to the family of the old woman at any time?"

"Nobody asked me. I don't live in that society. I told Maithili, I would vouch for her. We were just waiting for aunty to get better. Then I was going to explain everything to her family. I believe they were planning to sue Maithili." Nisha looked questioningly at Cherian.

"Yes, they were. But I do wish you had told them what you saw." Cherian sighed.

"Why?" Nisha asked, alarmed by Cherian's despondent tone.

"Maithili was murdered earlier this morning." Cherian disclosed.

"WHAT?" Nisha sputtered and coughed, as the tea she had just sipped went down her windpipe. "No way. No, I don't believe you. This is impossible." Nisha added, after recovering from her coughing fit. "This is a trick, right? Cherian, stop playing games with me."

"It's the truth. I would never upset you so, otherwise." Cherian walked up to Nisha. She placed a comforting hand on Nisha's shoulder. Even in her distraught state, Nisha couldn't help but note that Cherian had come a long way since she had first met her. Nisha was glad Cherian was learning to fight the cynicism her job had been driving her to. "Tell me what happened after the skating accident? It could be important." Cherian persisted, albeit softly.

Tears welled up in Nisha's eyes. "The kid on the cycle bolted. I dashed over to help. Maithili, like me, was wearing all her guards, so she was okay, more or less. But aunty was unconscious. I called Priya and asked her to get Abhay to send an ambulance," Nisha

recounted. "I waited there till the old woman's son arrived, and then I left." Nisha wiped away her tears.

"Did he seem angry?" Cherian asked, returning to her chair and sipping her tea.

"I think he was in shock when he saw his mother lying on the concrete. He kept checking her pulse. Maithili was still there when I left. She told me she waited till the medics came. But what's all this got to do with Maithili? Are you really sure she is dead?"

"I am," Cherian responded calmly, "and not just dead, but murdered. Some one whacked the back of her head."

"WHAT?" Nisha blinked. Her face scrunched up as she struggled to process everything Cherian had just said. She stared, as a horrible possibility occurred to her. "You don't mean the old woman's son killed Maithili, do you?" she asked, hardly daring to breathe, as she fidgeted with a stray curly lock that had escaped her ponytail.

Cherian bit her lip. "No, it's unlikely. Anyway, he is almost seventy. It's the grandson, Amit, who is the prime suspect. Soon after he arrived a couple of days ago, his grandma smiled at him, whispered his name and then passed out. An hour later, when she still did not regain consciousness, he became very agitated. He

dashed off to Maithili's apartment, waved his fist and threatened to kill her."

Nisha closed her eyes and shook her head, as another tear trickled down her cheek and into her tea. "I had no idea. I wish Maithili had told me. I would have explained everything to the family."

"She tried telling Amit what happened, but he did not believe her. Furious that she was making excuses, he stomped out of her apartment in a rage and slammed the door. Then, between sobs he shouted out, *I'll kill you. If she isn't better for her birthday, I'll kill you.* The neighbors heard him. He continued to sob until the elevator came."

"This is horrible." Nisha pursed her lips, pain etched all over her face. "But then what's the mystery?" she asked, gulping down the last of her tea.

"Well, today, after we discovered the body, I went to his house to arrest him. But he insists he did not kill her."

Nisha raised her eyebrows and waited. "Well," Cherian hesitated. "Today is the funeral, so..."

"Oh, right," Nisha bit her lip and drew a sharp breath.

"But, you know," Cherian hesitated. "Well, you know, I just don't think it is him."

Nisha's eyebrows shot up, and her eyes widened.  
"Since when have you started believing prime suspects when they plead their innocence?" Nisha asked, resting her chin on her hand.

"This is all your fault," Cherian grumbled. "My job used to be so much easier before I met you. Arrest the person all the evidence points to and get a confession out of them."

"All the circumstantial evidence you mean?" Nisha's narrowed her eyes.

"Umm, yeah." Cherian blushed.

"So why do you think it might not be Amit?" Nisha asked in a softer tone. "I mean apart from his assertion. You must have more reason than that to consider the possibility of his innocence. Does he have an alibi?"

Cherian looked sheepish. Not a good one. It's just that, when he threatened Maithili two days ago, her neighbors called the station. I went to see Maithili and him. She was upset of course, but not so much because of Amit's threats, but because of how sick the old lady was. She had contracted a secondary infection

or something. Amit was grief stricken holding his grandma's hand continuously crying, and I made a judgment call. I concluded that Amit's bark was worse than his bite. I was convinced he would not actually hurt Maithili, and that he just needed to vent his frustration. So I left him with the warning that any further aggressive behavior on his part would result in an arrest. Perhaps, I was wrong, but I still don't think so."

"I see. So you think this is your fault. You think you should have taken his threat more seriously. And now you are hoping it wasn't him, so you won't have blood on your hands." Nisha observed without malice.

Cherian gritted her teeth. "Yes," she whispered, "but for what it's worth, I still believe I made the right call then, given the information I had."

"Amy, I'm impressed." Nisha smiled, using Cherian's given name for the first time.

Cherian goggled at her, but Nisha pressed her hand. "That took a lot of courage to admit. I'm proud of you." She smiled. "So tell me, whom do you suspect?"

"No one, at the moment. I was hoping you would be able give me some insights or gossip that might help."

"Maithili was in her mid thirties and widowed. Her husband died of a heart attack four years ago. I don't know the details, but he left her enough money for a comfortable life. She was an artist doing fairly well for herself."

"What about her husband's family?" Cherian asked.

"From what I gather, he was an only child, and she always had a good relationship with his parents. His parents live in my building, actually, two floors above me. Maithili used to live in Juhu with her husband, but she moved to the flat in the next society sometime after his death, so she could be closer to her in-laws."

"What about her own family?"

Nisha shook her head. "No idea. I have talked to her only a few times, you know. She only mentioned her in-laws to me because she was coming to visit them last week, and she knew I lived here."

"Oh," Cherian was disappointed, "but then why were you so upset with the news of her murder? I mean, it seemed personal to you."

"I had become fond of her, because she was the only other middle-aged woman I knew who skated. We bonded over that. And she was truly upset about the accident. She approached me, because I had witnessed

it. She wanted to know, if I thought it was her fault. That's when we talked. Last week, Priya had mentioned aunty was recovering well, and Maithili was so relieved when I conveyed the news to her. But a few days ago, when her condition started deteriorating again, Maithili was distraught. I wish I had spoken to her in the last couple of days, after Amit came to see her." Nisha lamented. "She must have been devastated."

"What about her in-laws? Do you know them well?" Cherian asked.

"They've been living above me since I moved into this society over a decade ago. But they're much older, so I just usually say hello to them when I see them down in the compound or in the elevator."

"Will you help me solve this case? You can get information people won't share with the police, through your gossip networks. I'll tell you anything I learn, officially. What say?" Cherian asked. "Come on, you know you enjoy it," she coaxed. "And you owe it to your friend," she added noticing Nisha's hesitancy.

Nisha finally nodded. "I'll see what I can find out."

"How about accompanying me now? I have to begin my investigation by informing her in-laws."

"Okay, but just give me a moment. I'd like to change into something more appropriate." Nisha was about to go to her bedroom, when her eyes fell on the dismantled skates on the dining table. "Oh never mind. I'll deal with these later," she mumbled before dashing off to her cupboard.

It took Nisha five minutes to swap her black tights and purple T-shirt for a crisp, pale yellow, cotton *salwar kameez* and another minute to spruce up her ponytail. "Reshma, close the door behind you when you leave," she called out, before following Cherian out of the door.

"You've lost weight," Cherian observed as they climbed the stairs.

Nisha smiled. "Yeah, Ankita literally has me on my toes as much as she can. I really enjoyed skating, but I doubt I can do it anymore. It'll be a long time before they allow it in that society again."

"You know, we have a nice empty space for training in the police colony. If you come as my guest, you can use it for skating." Cherian offered.

"Really?" Nisha's eyes shone with excitement. "I would really appreciate it. Even if I can even come for an hour a week, I won't forget how to skate."

"I'll check with the authorities, but I'm sure it'll be fine. I have one condition though."

"What?" Nisha asked warily.

"Will you help me to learn to skate?"

"Sure," Nisha nodded amused. "I had no idea you'd be interested. Hell, I'll even buy you a pair of skates, if you can arrange for me to skate in the police colony."

"Deal," Cherian shook hands with Nisha. "But first we need to solve this case." Cherian rang the doorbell of the apartment they were headed for.

## Once Upon A Time

A plump, gray-haired woman in her mid to late sixties opened the main door. She was dressed in a brownish orange *sari*. Crinkles of worry appeared on her forehead when she saw Cherian in uniform. Still keeping the safety door closed, "Yes?" she inquired, peering through the bars.

"Madam, may we please come in?" Cherian requested.

A frail old man dressed in a white *dhoti* and *kurta* appeared behind the old woman. "Who is it, Lata?" he asked in a crackling voice.

"The police," Lata replied, opening the latch on the safety door. The old couple exchanged puzzled, worried glances. Then Lata noticed Nisha and smiled, her suspicion waning a little. She turned the knob on the safety door and let them in.

"Aunty," Cherian began, once seated next to Lata, on the simple futon couch in their sparsely furnished living room. "I have some bad news. Uncle, please sit down," she urged, when she noticed the old man making his way to the kitchen.

"I'm just going to get you some water," he explained in a raspy voice.

"Please Uncle, sit down," Cherian pleaded, and he complied, occupying one of the chairs opposite the futon couch. Nisha was seated on the other chair facing the futon couch. "Maithili, your daughter-in-law, is dead," Cherian announced, only to be greeted by uncomprehending expressions.

"She wasn't sick," Lata said after a minute of stunned silence. "What happened to her?"

Cherian gulped and steeled herself. "She was murdered," she blurted out and turned helplessly to Nisha, as the old couple gaped at her.

"Aunty," Nisha sat on her haunches on the floor in front of Lata and clasped her hand. She nodded in reply to Lata's silent request for confirmation.

"We are cursed," the old man mumbled. "Fate snatched our wonderful son and beloved daughter-in-law from us long before their time. No one should live so long as to watch their children die." His voice was hard.

"Few are blessed with a son and daughter-in-law as loving as ours. We were lucky to have them, if only

for a short time." Lata corrected him, a tear running down her wrinkled cheek.

"Of course, you are right as always, Lata." The old man walked upto Lata, as Nisha retreated back to her chair. Cherian moved to his chair, so as to make space for him on the futon. The old couple held hands and shed silent tears.

Cherian steeled herself to complete her dismal task of asking the necessary unpleasant questions. She cleared her throat, "Do you have any idea at all, who could have done this? Was anyone angry with her for anything?"

The old couple stared at Cherian in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Lata spoke. "She mentioned someone was threatening to sue her because of the skating accident, but she did not give us any details. She said she would handle it, and that we should not worry about it." She shook her head. "This morning we received the tragic news about the death of the old woman. It's horrible, just horrible," Lata cried.

"Maithili was so broken up about it. She wanted so badly to apologize to the family and do something for them, but her lawyer insisted she should say nothing. Anything she said, he told her, might have serious consequences for the case."

"I hate lawyers," Cherian mumbled under her breath, but only Nisha heard her. "What about family? Did she have any siblings? Who stands to inherit her property and money?" Cherian plodded on with the necessary questioning.

"Maithili was raised by her father. Her mother died during childbirth, and she had no siblings. She was a spirited and cheerful girl. Our only son Vikram and she fell in love after they met in college. They got married as soon as they turned twenty one." Lata sniffled. "At that time, I shouted at Vikram for being short sighted and stupid. I told him to get settled in a job first, but he would not listen, and thank goodness, for that way, Maithili and he had almost a decade of marital bliss, and I mean bliss, for I have never seen any two people more in love or happier together." Overcome by emotion, Lata paused.

So the old man took over. "A couple of years after they were married, Maithili's father, Sundernath was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She was devastated at the prospect of losing the only family from her childhood. We consoled and supported her as best we could. Her father lived only another four months in which we encouraged her spend a lot of time with him, and eventually she made her peace with his death. He wasn't rich, but he left her his family home in Juhu, an old house adjoining the beach. Vikram and

Maithili moved in there after his death. Living in her childhood home, comforted Maithili. Besides, a view of the beach from their living room window inspired a lot of her art. At that time, Vikram was earning well as an investment banker, so they did up the place with modern amenities, but retained its old world charm. Maithili herself did most of the designing. They were so happy there for a few years and were just planning to have children, when my son succumbed to a heart attack." Tears streamed down the old man's wrinkled cheeks.

Lata took over the story. Now that they had started telling it, they seemed unable to stop. "At around the same time they were renovating the Juhu house, the apartment building we used to live in, in Chembur, went for redevelopment, and these new high rises had just been built. Vikram suggested we move here, so we would have a new apartment with modern conveniences that would serve us the rest of our lives. It was also an easier commute to their Juhu house. After Vikram died, the Juhu house became oppressive with memories for Maithili. It was however in a prime location, so she was able to sell it for a tidy sum, and she decided to move to the neighboring society to be close to us." Lata picked up a framed picture of the three of them, from next to a lamp on the end table beside the futon couch.

"We took that one last Diwali, when she came over here for the Laxmi puja." The old man had been listening with his face hidden in his palms. As Lata finished, he looked up and wiped away his tears. The two of them looked longingly at the picture. Then the old man turned to Cherian, "I don't think Maithili made an explicit will. She had no children, so I am ignorant of the legalities of the matter," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

Cherian nodded. "Did she have any close friends?"

"Since Vikram died, she immersed herself in her work and avoided forming any attachments. I mean she was always cheerful and friendly, but she wouldn't let anyone in. I tried to encourage her to make friends and even search for a life partner, but she wouldn't hear of it. She said we were her family and that was all she needed. I tried to tell her that we were getting old and wouldn't be around for long, but she wouldn't hear of it. You two are going to outlive me, she would joke." Lata's shoulders shook as she silently sobbed into her palms.

"What kind of work did she do?" Nisha asked. She lamented not getting to know Maithili better.

"Vikram's investments and the sale of the house in Juhu left her in a comfortable financial position. So she only worked for pleasure. Still, she earned a

decent amount from selling her paintings and artwork." The old man proudly pointed at an abstract painting on his wall. "A Maithili original like this is worth at least thirty-thousand rupees."

Nisha, who was no art expert, found that the lively painting evoked amusement. The old man noticed her smile. "Yes, Maithili was like that. Her art was playful and chirpy, a lot like her." He shook his head and sighed.

"There is some heavy duty equipment at her house. Do you know if she was undertaking some home improvement project?" Cherian asked.

"She got curious about stone carving a couple of years ago. It took her a while to procure all the equipment and learn, but over the last few months, she had become pretty good at it." The old man smiled. He pointed to a stone Ganesh idol on a wooden shelf sticking out of the wall in front of the futon couch. It had a few other curio items as well.

"Maithili made this?" Cherian asked, walking up to the idol to examine it. "It's so smooth," she commented, admiring the glossy soft curves reflecting light.

The old man nodded. "A few days ago, she mentioned that she was working on her own interpretation of a

sculpture of Ahalya from Indian mythology."

Nisha smiled. "You mean the later version of the story, where she is cursed to turn to stone."

"Yes," the old man sighed. "You understand her."

"I only wish I had known her better. We had only talked a few times, and since the accident, she was so stressed out." Nisha bit her lips.

"How was she killed?" Lata summoned the courage to ask after wiping away her tears.

"What?" Nisha asked, staring at her blankly.

"I mean, what weapon was used to kill her? Was it a gun? Did she suffer?" Lata looked directly at Cherian.

"Oh, no, I don't think she did. Someone hit her hard on the back of her head with a heavy blunt object. But there was no sign of a struggle. Whoever did it, caught her unaware. Her death was instantaneous."

"Oh," Lata nodded, descending into silent gloom.

"Was she killed because of the accident? Did the old lady's grandson kill her? Maithili tried her best to prevent the accident. The grandson wouldn't believe

her, but it's true. The incident tormented her." The old man began pacing.

"We don't know who killed Maithili, but Amit, the grandson is a suspect, of course. Is there anyone else she was having trouble with?" Cherian asked.

"The mother of the young cyclist Maithili had to dodge, got very angry when she asked her to have the child corroborate her story. She said Maithili was trying to blame a little child for her mistakes and threatened to sue her, if she ever contacted them again. However, when the old lady died, Maithili was desperate, and she was thinking of approaching them. I don't know if she did," the old man informed them. Nisha and Cherian exchanged significant looks.

"May we see her?" Lata asked. "Oh dear, she was such a sweet girl. How could someone kill her? What are we going to do about the funeral?" she sobbed.

Nisha rushed up to Lata and put her arm around her. "Don't worry, Aunty. I'll help with whatever you need."

But Lata was inconsolable. "What are we going to do without her? And what happens when one of us dies? The other will be all alone. Who is to look after us? Who could be so cruel as to take her away from us? I

must see her. I must." Lata lost all control, as she banged her fists in grief on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry, but you can't see her now. Perhaps, after the autopsy," Cherian mumbled, unable to look at the old couple.

"Maithili's and Vikram's story began just like a fairytale, once upon a time, but their ever after was cruelly cut short," the old man lamented.

Nisha grimaced as she hastened out of the house along with Cherian. They looked at each other in deep misery. "So what now?" Nisha asked.

"I'll go talk to the neighbors. Can you do anything for Lata and her husband?"

"I can help them arrange for the funeral once you release her body." Nisha offered.

"Thanks," Cherian nodded. "Do you want to come with me now to talk to the neighbors?"

Nisha looked at her watch and nodded. It was only noon. She still had a couple of hours before Rohan was due to arrive for his math class.

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Before going to see Maithili's neighbors, Cherian had to stop by Maithili's apartment to check on her staff as they closed up the crime scene. So, Nisha got a chance to take a look at the place. It was on the twentieth floor of the building. Every floor had the same layout, and this flat was in the same column as Priya Desai's apartment, Nisha noted. Although structurally identical to Priya Desai's apartment, all similarity ended there. The decor could not have been more different, from Priya's conventional interiors painted in muted colors, Nisha observed with interest.

Nisha was thankful that Maithili's body had been removed, but a crayon outline marked the position where she had fallen. There wasn't much blood, but the room was very dusty.

"How do you know she was hit on her head with a heavy blunt object?" Nisha asked. "I mean, couldn't she have just slipped or tripped and hit her head on the floor?" Nisha still couldn't digest the idea of her new friend being murdered.

"I suppose it is possible I could be wrong," Cherian admitted, cautious after her lessons from solving the previous two cases, "but it seems very unlikely. You see we found her lying on her left side, but the fatal wound was on the right side of the back of her head."

Nisha sighed. Right in front of the crayon outline of the body, was a rough wooden workbench with power tools, a large block of stone Maithili had probably been halfway through carving into someone's face, probably Ahalya's, a hammer and several tools Nisha was unfamiliar with. "Odd to be doing this in the living room, isn't it?" Nisha asked.

"From what I gather, she was pretty odd. She lived alone, so she devoted the largest room to her work. This living room was probably her art studio. Inside however, is quite cozy." Cherian led Nisha around the workbench and through a passage with three doors leading into three cozily furnished rooms painted in vibrant colors. "This was her bedroom, I think," Cherian said, opening the first door which was bright red. Inside, a fat red quilt covered a very soft and squishy mattress on a teak wood bed with carved bedposts. Several soft pillows of various sizes and shapes littered the mattress, and a couple had spilled over onto the floor. On the front of the bed and on the headboard, were ornate carvings of goats and birds.

The room also had a large teak wood cupboard along the wall opposite the bed. A dressing table with a large mirror stood on one side of the headboard, spanning the space up to the wall with a window. On the dressing table was a messy stack of four or five books. Nisha glanced at the one on top; a Victorian romance,

she deduced from the title and cover art. She suppressed a smile. *In spite of her own tragic romance, Maithili still enjoyed the genre*, Nisha noted, *or perhaps because of it*, she concluded upon further thought. The wall on the other side of the headboard was lined with bookshelves that continued around the corner all the way up to the door frame. Miniature stone and wooden sculptures littered the a wooden shelf built into the wall above the headboard. Nisha peeked into one of the drawers of the dressing table and was a little surprised by what she found, but it did not seem like the appropriate time to mention it.

The next room had a green door, and inside, each corner of the room had a cozy wooden rocking chair with squashy green cushions. At the center of the room stood a large low dark brown wooden coffee table on an intricately designed Persian carpet. Large, fat green cushions with white embroidery were placed on the carpet all around the coffee table.

The third room had an orange door. In stark contrast with the rest of the rest of the house, its decor was commonplace. A generic wooden double bed was covered with a neat pale yellow bedspread. A simple night stand with a drawer stood on either side of the headboard. And a small closet stood in one corner of the room opposite the window. The room looked like

it hadn't been used in a while, but was regularly dusted.

"Oh, I get it, traffic lights," Nisha smiled as she scanned the room from the outside, but did not feel the need to step in.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Cherian frowned.

"The door colors are the same as traffic lights. No entry into her bedroom signaled by the red door, open entry into the living room for all signaled by the green door and entry restricted to house guests for the guest room indicated by the orange door," Nisha explained as she proceeded back to the living room.

"Makes sense, but boy was she weird!" Cherian rolled her eyes.

"So how did this go down? What do you know?" Nisha asked, looking around.

"As far as I can tell, someone walked in, bashed the back of her head with a blunt instrument, and she died instantly. If she screamed, she would probably not be heard over the sound of these stone carving power tools. My guess is, she was engrossed in work and did not see it coming."

"But how did the killer get in?" Nisha was puzzled.

"Through the door, I imagine. When the housekeeping staff came to collect her garbage, they saw her lying dead, and the door was wide open. They told me, she usually kept her main door open when she was carving, because of the dust."

"You know, I am amazed the society permitted her to do this. I mean, it's messy and probably annoying for the neighbors," Nisha observed. "What about the stone cutting power tool? Was it on when the housekeeping staff came? Otherwise the killer may have switched it off and you can lift a fingerprint from it."

"No. It seems like the plug got yanked out when she fell. It was lying on the floor next to her hand, with the switch in the on position. I sent the tool to the lab anyway. Let's see if it yields anything useful."

"What about footprints?" Nisha asked eying the dust on the floor.

"There were too many, jumbled and overlapping by the time I got here. The housekeeping people who discovered the body, Jyotsna the neighbor who came out when they screamed and later called us, and the medics who took her body away, had all walked around near the body."

"What about the dust outside the apartment? Were there any footprints that might point to where the

killer came from, perhaps a particular lift or the staircase or the neighbor's house?"

"The housekeeping guys had efficiently cleaned out all the dust from the outside before they came to Maithili's door to collect her garbage," Cherian grumbled.

Nisha nodded. It had been a strange morning. Almost, like reading a the story that comes after the happily ever after in a fairytale. So, it began with *Once upon a time a boy and a girl were deeply in love* and ended with *She died and joined him in heaven*. Was Maithili in heaven? Nisha did not believe in such things, but from what she had learned today, that's where Maithili deserved to be with Vikram. Nisha shook her head and sighed. She was a science teacher, but a romantic too. *Oops, science teacher*, she remembered. "Oh gosh! It's almost one," she exclaimed, glancing at her watch. "I must get back. Rohan will be coming for his math class soon. I can't come with you to meet the neighbor, but can you text me the gist of what you learn?"

"Sure, and you find out what you can from your sidekick." Cherian winked.

"Sidekick?" Nisha was confused.

"Rohan, of course." Cherian laughed. "He seems to give you all kinds of vital information that helps you

solve cases."

"Oh no Cherian, Rohan isn't my sidekick, you are."  
Nisha corrected.

Cherian narrowed her eyes and frowned. When she couldn't come up with a scathing retort, she turned away in a huff. It was Nisha's turn to laugh as she waved goodbye.

*Could Rohan know anything useful? Nisha wondered, as she walked home. Cherian had a point. He had been a valuable source of information in the past. Suddenly, Nisha remembered the thing she had seen in the drawer in Maithili's bedroom. Could Rohan, or maybe the neighbor, possibly know anything about that?* she narrowed her eyes and rubbed her chin.

## Shocking Revelations

Nisha returned and hastily packed her skates away. She then wiped down the dining table, went to the kitchen and helped herself to some rice, chicken curry and homemade mango chutney. *Simple food, but so tasty*, Nisha thought. *Reshma is a really good cook. I wonder if she will ever forgive Cherian though.* Nisha had barely finished eating when the doorbell rang.

At 2:00 pm, Rohan arrived for his math class at Nisha's apartment. It took him a few minutes to take off his shoes, as he fumbled with the laces. Nisha wondered why he was so fidgety.

"What's up Grasshopper?" she asked, noticing him bouncing on his heels.

"Did you hear about the murder, Lady?" he blurted out, unable to contain himself any longer. "It's in the next society. Are you going to work on it?" His eyes shone with excitement.

Nisha sighed. She too wanted to desperately discuss the case with Rohan, but now wasn't the time. She was his teacher first. "Maybe, but right now, we're going to work on integration sums."

"Lady, these are awful," Rohan groaned, glancing at the list of sums Nisha had prepared for him. "Do you get sadistic pleasure in coming up with these tortuously difficult problems?"

"Now Grasshopper, I know you're smart, but you must be patient. There's only ten of them. The sooner, you get done, the sooner we can discuss the case." Nisha's eyes glinted.

"No!" Rohan narrowed his eyes. "You're evil, Lady. But you sure know how to motivate a guy. And to think, the other teachers just deliver long boring lectures about failing the class. You're on!" Rohan pulled out a couple of pencils and an eraser and immersed himself in solving the problems.

Concentrating hard, he raced to through the first six. *That boy has a quick brain. If only he'd use it more often*, Nisha mused. But the seventh question stumped him. Nisha watched as he tried various substitutions and failed. He was good at deciphering patterns, but he was missing something. It was so simple. If he hadn't just done the previous sums, he might have not fallen into the trap. *It's tricky how sometimes our brain gets stuck thinking one way and fails to see the obvious*, Nisha thought. And that's what she had learned about solving mysteries. The solutions were always simple. But prejudices, incorrect assumptions

and loads of useless unrelated information stood in the way of finding them. Finding the correct answer, required clearing the clutter.

"It's not always a clever pattern, Grasshopper. Sometimes only hard work will get you the answer," was Nisha's cryptic hint."

"What?" Rohan looked up. "Wait! What?" he frowned and stared at the problem. Then he copied it onto a fresh sheet of paper and tried something different. After a few more minutes of messing around, his eyes lit up. "You are evil," he mumbled as his pencil scratched away fervently at the paper. "Two different substitutions? Really? That's cruel, Lady."

"That's life," Nisha shrugged, "or a plot twist, if you prefer." She winked.

Rohan plodded on. When he reached the ninth problem, he was stuck once again. Nisha grinned. She knew this was a particularly messy one requiring both trigonometric as well as polynomial substitutions. Rohan chewed on his pencil, but did not ask for help. He started afresh a couple of times before he made a breakthrough. Nisha smiled and patted his back.

It was 4:30 pm when Rohan was done with all the problems. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "We still have half an hour, Lady. Can we talk about the case?"

"Sure," Nisha smiled. "You've earned it, Grasshopper." Nisha began telling him what she had learned.

She was almost through with her report, when her phone beeped. Cherian had finally found the time to update her. Nisha rushed through the part with some details Cherian had forgotten to tell her in the morning. But the interview with the neighbor had revealed some interesting facts. She had been expecting something like this, but who could it be? Then her eyes lit up as she turned to Rohan. "I think you can help me with this, Grasshopper."

"What?" Rohan asked, intrigued.

"Do you know if Maithili was dating a younger guy? Someone a few years older than you, perhaps?"

Rohan began to shake his head and then stopped. "I don't know anything about the woman who was murdered, but about a month and a half ago, there were some rumors about a guy dating an older woman in that society. I can ask Asif and get back to you. I think he knows who the guy is. It's all gossip, but you can begin there."

Nisha nodded. "Thanks, Grasshopper. That would be really helpful."

"So you don't think that old lady's grandson did it?" Rohan raised his eyebrows. "Everyone else does."

"What do you mean? She only died this morning!" Nisha frowned.

"It's a murder, Lady." Rohan rolled his eyes. "Of course, everyone is talking and speculating. So who do you think did it?" Rohan asked, tugging at his goatee.

"I don't know." Nisha shrugged. "I'm just trying to gather information at the moment. But Cherian doesn't think he did it."

"The police lady." Rohan frowned. "Isn't she usually wrong?"

"Yeah, two for two." Nisha laughed, as Rohan packed his stuff and got up to leave. "But I liked Maithili, so I'd like to find out the truth. Besides Cherian is growing up."

"Do you consider the guy she was dating a suspect?" Rohan's eyes lit up.

"Why not? Seems like a possibility. Accidents can happen. When you play with fire.." Nisha trailed off as she stared into space. She stood up a moment later and

called Cherian. She bit her lips when Cherian did not answer.

"Accident? Fire? What do mean? Do you think it's not really a murder?" Rohan was baffled.

"No! It's a murder, alright. She was careful. But still ..." Nisha shook her head.

"She? Is the murderer a woman? What is it, Lady? Have you had an epiphany?"

"In murder cases, the lover is often suspect," Nisha remembered from all the detective fiction she had read. "But what motive could this kid possibly have?"

"And you have thought of a motive?" Rohan asked.

"An unlikely possibility, but yes, it could be a motive." Nisha sat down again, thinking hard. Then she picked up her phone and messaged Cherian.

"There you go again, being all cryptic," Rohan complained.

"Sorry, Grasshopper. I can't say anything, at the moment. It just wouldn't be right. I must be sure. But thanks, you've given me a lot to think about." She smiled, and Rohan shrugged.

"I guess I should be used to this by now." He rolled his eyes. "I can't wait for the mess to be sorted out, so I can skate again. You were getting quite good too, Lady. So just solve this case, okay? I'll let you know as soon as I learn anything."

Nisha nodded. When Rohan opened the door to leave, he was startled to find Priya Desai standing there with her finger on the doorbell.

"I was just about to ring it," she blurted out, just as startled.

"What are the odds?" Rohan mumbled, but Nisha laughed.

"After all, she was waiting for our class to finish before she called, right Priya?" Nisha explained, as Priya nodded. Once again, Nisha became thoughtful. *Could it be*, she wondered, but then she shook her head. She was letting her imagination run away again. Priya had been asking Rohan how his friend Asif was doing, and neither of them noticed Nisha's distraction.

Priya followed Nisha to the living room. A soon as she sat down, she got to the point. "Our society wants to help Maithili's in-laws with her funeral arrangements. From what I hear, she has no other close relatives?" Priya looked at Nisha for confirmation.

"I am so glad." Nisha nodded. "I was worried about Aunty and Uncle. But I did not know how much I could help them all by myself, especially since I am working the case. Cherian says the autopsy will be done by tomorrow evening. Then they can have her body sent directly to the cremation grounds by Thursday morning."

"Great, I got the contact number of the crematorium today, when I was at the old lady's funeral. I will make all the arrangements tomorrow, and I can drive Aunty and Uncle there, if they would like that."

"Thanks so much, Priya. You're an angel."

"Do you think they have a family priest? Or should we arrange for one?" Priya asked.

"Let's go talk to them," Nisha suggested and led the way to the old couple's apartment.

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Once again that day, Nisha found herself exiting the old couple's apartment. Lata had burst into tears. "You are very kind. Thank you, thank you so much." She had sobbed, when Priya had offered to manage Maithili's funeral. Nisha could not resist giving Lata a hug.

"Priya, do you know the family of the cyclist Maithili was trying to avoid, when she collided with the old woman?" Nisha asked, as they took the stairs back to Nisha's apartment.

"Just a little. The boy's mother, Malika, is a lawyer. The kid is unruly, and over the course of the last year, there have been several complaints about his mischief and bad behavior reported by various residents. She is defensive about her son. I think that's why, when Maithili approached her, asking if he would back up her story, she flared up and absolutely refused."

"Does she have a bad temper?" Nisha asked unlocking the door to her apartment. "The old man said this morning that Maithili was desperate when the old woman died, and she planned to renew her request to the boy's family to corroborate her story. Could this have made his mother angry enough to lose it?" Nisha walked to her kitchen and Priya followed.

Priya shrugged. "I don't know. Malika is quite aggressive, but she probably has to be, given that she is a criminal prosecutor. I know she feels guilty about not being able to devote enough time to her child. Society can be very unkind to women. To assuage her guilt, she goes easy on him when he misbehaves. Honestly, I don't know what she would be capable of, if she felt someone was messing with her kid. She's

quite the protective mama bear, with oodles of insecurities complicating the matter."

"Hmm.. Let's have some tea," Nisha suggested, setting a kettle full of water to boil. "I wonder what weapon the killer used. Cherian's message mentioned that the weapon was not found near her body. They searched her house, but they couldn't find anything. There was a large hammer and a couple of mallets on the workbench, but the lab confirmed that none of them had any traces of blood, or any fingerprints, besides those belonging to Maithili."

"Perhaps, there was another hammer or mallet the killer used and then discarded elsewhere," Priya offered. "Or maybe the killer brought the weapon with them."

"Yeah, I wonder which it was. If it was the second, then the murder would have to be premeditated, right?" This case was getting increasingly disturbing for Nisha, who had grown rather fond of Maithili.

"Yeah, I guess. But, what could it be? What do people keep in their houses that could be used to bash someone's head in?" Priya wondered.

"A cricket bat?" Nisha suggested.

"Perhaps, but would a blow from a cricket bat be fatal?"

"I don't know, but if it were at just the right angle. I'll ask Cherian if Amit has one." Nisha decided, just as a piercing whistle informed them that the kettle was boiling.

As they sipped tea seated around the coffee table in Nisha's living room, Priya cleared her throat and ventured, "I know the cards are stacked against Amit, but I don't think it's him."

"You too?" Nisha blinked "Why? Do you know him well?"

"No." Priya shook her head and set her half drunk cup of tea down on the coffee table. "He came to see us and thanked Abhay for getting his grandma into the hospital so promptly. He stayed for sometime and spoke to us. He seems so gentle. I mean everyone loses their temper sometimes, but I don't think he would be capable of murder, especially not the premeditated kind."

"Maithili too was such a sweetheart. I simply can't imagine anyone wanting to murder her. That's why I can't imagine anyone except Amit, who was provoked by circumstances, into doing it." Nisha responded mulishly.

Priya laughed. "I see you have your prejudices too. You're a very loyal friend, Nisha. I love you for that. But it's messing with your judgment in this case. You're too close to it."

"Fine. You're probably right. But I am sticking with the case, anyway. So is there anything you know that might help me?" Nisha looked defiant as she sipped her tea.

Priya narrowed her eyes. "You're not going to like this, but Maithili had quite a temper. A few days ago, she flew into a rage at one of the managing committee members. Nina, was doing the rounds to check if anyone had left their garbage out. Maithili almost always left it out, so the housekeeping staff wouldn't bother her while she worked. Nina rang the doorbell incessantly while Maithili was working. I guess she couldn't hear her over the sound of her tools. Finally, as she powered down the stone cutting tool, she heard the doorbell and got startled. Her hand jerked, slipped on the power switch, and she made a deep gash on the block of stone she had been carving. Stunned by the damage, she exploded and yelled at Nina, liberally using abusive language. I doubt Maithili was even aware of the new rule that was formulated after the monkey incident."

"Oh, right." Nisha recalled. "The monkey that came into your society premises and wouldn't leave. It would eat out of the garbage bags that people left outside in the mornings. Didn't the municipal authorities and forest department say there was nothing they could do?" Nisha giggled.

Priya frowned. "It's not funny. It was a menace for days. I left my balcony window open the first morning, when I hadn't yet seen the messages on the society WhatsApp group. It came into my house, rushed into the kitchen, grabbed a whole watermelon and dashed out. I was too stunned to react until a few minutes after it had left. STOP LAUGHING," Priya shouted. "What if he had bitten me? I was so scared."

"Sorry Priya. Oh, I know it must have been frightening for you, but still." Nisha sipped her tea to hide her amusement, but the vivid image of a cackling monkey carting off a large watermelon popped before her mind's eye, and she almost choked on her tea.

"Serves you right!" Priya admonished, unfeelingly. Then she cracked a smile. When Nisha had recovered, she continued, "The authorities insisted it would be too risky to use the tranquilizer gun while it trotted about the building, because it might dodge the dart, which might then accidentally strike someone else."

"Ouch! That sounds bad. But then how did you get rid of the monkey?" Nisha asked, still struggling to stifle her mirth.

"We were told to ensure the monkey had no access to food, so eventually it would leave on its own, and it did after the new garbage policy was implemented, and everyone kept their windows tightly shut." Priya heaved a sigh of relief.

"But the garbage rule remained, even after the monkey left?" Nisha asked.

"It did. It's a good rule too. Garbage lying outside stinks up the common areas." Priya wrinkled her nose.

"So what happened with Nina?"

"She was livid. She posted the entire incident on the society WhatsApp group, along with a video recording of Maithili screaming at her. She commented that after being a victim of Maithili's rage, she was convinced that Maithili was quite capable of deliberately running the old lady over in a fit of anger."

"That's stupid. Maithili lost her temper when hours of work and materials she cherished got destroyed in a moment. It has nothing to do with the accident. Besides, I was there. I saw it. No one was angry or shouting. Also, doesn't this only strengthen the case

against Amit, if he believed Nina? Or are you thinking Nina herself attacked Maithili?"

"Well, you know, Nina is quite spiteful, and no one likes her anal rules. So some people told her off for connecting Maithili's annoyance with the accident. She did not like it. Also, Maithili brazenly continued to flout the garbage rule. Nina posted that willful women like Maithili who could not control their emotions would come to a bad end. If you ask me, Nina should know. She has the same kind of explosive temper." Priya rolled her eyes.

"Has Nina said anything on the group about Maithili's murder?" Nisha asked."

Priya frowned. "To come to think of it, no. She has been surprisingly mute on the subject."

"Was Nina doing the rounds again today?" Nisha asked, looking thoughtful.

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, she may have seen Maithili's garbage out again and snapped. She could have bashed Maithili's head in a fit of anger and then left without anyone noticing."

"Yikes, you make us all sound so blood thirsty. Nina was petty and vindictive, but really just grumpy from

being lonely, I think. I can't imagine that she would get violent." Priya shook her head.

"But someone did get violent," Nisha pointed out.

"True," Priya grimaced, stealing a glance at the wall clock above the TV beyond the coffee table. "Oh goodness! It's 6:30 already. How time flies when we gossip. I have to get home to instruct my cook." Priya got up in a hurry, and Nisha walked her to the door. "Bye." She waved from the elevator lobby. "Keep me updated, and let me know if I can help," she added, entering the elevator as Rajesh walked out of it.

Drained by the days events, Nisha walked straight into Raj's arms and hugged him.

"Oh, it has been that kind of a day, has it?" Raj asked, embracing her tightly with one arm, while holding his briefcase with the other. "Come on. Let's go in, and you can tell me all about it."

While Raj was in the bathroom freshening up, Nisha reheated the evening meal Reshma had made. In addition to the chicken curry, she served the steaming hot *moong dal* and *baingan bharta*, along with the *rotis* Reshma had kept in an insulated casserole.

"Your skater friend!" Raj goggled, when Nisha began her story. "Murdered! Nish, I am so sorry. How are

"you doing?" he asked, wrapping a piece of *roti* around some *baingan bharta*.

"Cherian wants me to help her solve the murder," Nisha looked uncertainly at Raj.

"You know I'm all for you solving cases. You're really good at it too, and Cherian could probably use your help, but aren't you too close to this one? I mean, wasn't she your friend?"

"Yes, but I had known her for only a few months. And I feel like I must know the truth ..." Nisha bit her lip.

"And you won't believe it, unless you find it out yourself," Rajesh finished, smiling at his wife. Nisha shrugged. He knew her well. They both ate silently for a few minutes.

"Then go right ahead. So who does Cherian suspect? At least, that's one person you can eliminate, right?" Raj winked, as he downed the last of his *moong dal*.

"Actually, that's one surprising aspect of this case. Cherian seems to have grown a lot since our first acquaintance. She thinks the prime suspect is innocent." Nisha put the last bit of *roti* in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

"Will wonders never cease?" Raj said, his eyes twinkling, but Nisha's expressionless face made him stop and frown. "Wait, you think that the prime suspect actually did it, don't you?" He raised his eyebrows. "Well, well, isn't this a day of firsts?"

Nisha stiffened. "Am I that easy to read?" she grumbled.

"I have known you for a long time, Nisha," Raj replied diplomatically. "And even if you were, what's so bad about it? You're a detective, not a criminal mastermind, remember?" He took his plate to the sink.

"I guess," Nisha mumbled, following Raj, fully aware that he was being evasive. "There are other suspects too. Apparently, she had a lover."

"Ah, the classic suspect. Any others?" Raj asked, making himself comfortable on the living room sofa.

"An angry, anal lady from the society managing committee. Maithili had lost her temper with her a few days ago. There's also the mother of the cyclist. She thought Maithili was trying to get her son in trouble. And of course there is Amit, the prime suspect. His grandma died yesterday. He threatened to kill Maithili if his grandma did not recover before her hundredth birthday."

"And Cherian thinks he is innocent? Why?" Raj blinked.

"She thinks his bark is worse than his bite. I guess that's possible. I haven't met him yet, so I don't know." Nisha's phone beeped, so she took a look. She had missed a message from Rohan earlier, and now Cherian was messaging. Nisha smiled.

"What happened, Nish?" Raj asked, intrigued by Nisha's expression.

"Rohan sent me a photo of her lover along with his name and address. But Cherian says she was pregnant."

"What??" Raj interjected. "Wait, you don't seem too surprised." He frowned.

"Well, I saw condoms in her nightstand drawer." Nisha shrugged.

"So you think the guy freaked out when she told him? How old is the guy?"

"In his twenties. His name is Harish."

"Holy cannoli! Maybe, she told Harish yesterday morning, and he flipped out."

"Yes, it's possible. I'll go with Cherian to meet him." Nisha sounded distracted.

"What? Something seems to be bothering you Nish. Out with it."

"It doesn't make any sense. I mean condoms are quite reliable, and she was in her thirties, so not exactly in her prime of fertility." Nisha pointed out. "Anyway, I want a break from thinking about this stuff. Let's watch some TV."

Raj picked up the remote, sat back and relaxed spreading his arms across the top of the sofa. Nisha snuggled onto her head onto his chest and he put her arm around her. "So what do you want to watch?" Raj asked, turning on the TV.

"Anything but a crime show," Nisha smiled. Raj nodded and surfed through channels, until he found a cooking show.

## A May December Romance

"Can you believe she was pregnant?" Cherian asked Nisha in the elevator on the way to Harish's apartment. "I mean, from what her in-laws said, she was devoted to her husband." Nisha had forwarded Rohan's message to Cherian, who had agreed that talking to Harish should be a priority.

Nisha shrugged. "Well Amy, it has been four years since her husband died. She is a healthy, independent and passionate woman in her prime. She has needs and urges too. None of that means, she stopped loving her dead husband."

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"Harish is in his twenties, Cherian. I doubt Maithili was deeply in love with him."

"You mean?" Cherian's eyes widened.

"Yes. I noticed condoms in her nightstand drawer."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cherian complained.

"Hey, I did not stop you from looking. You should be more thorough when you investigate." Nisha chided.

Cherian stuck her tongue out at Nisha. "Now, that's mature." Nisha rolled her eyes, and they both laughed.

Harish Patel lived on the twenty sixth floor of the wing adjacent to Maithili in the same society. Nisha looked at her watch. It was exactly 10:15 in the morning. It would have been at least an hour since Harish's parents had left for work. Harish himself worked in the evening and night, so he would be home. That morning, Rohan had come by and told Nisha that Harish would be expecting her and Cherian. He had asked for a personal favor since she would be going to Harish's house and also begged her not to bust Harish's chops, unless it was absolutely necessary. Cherian had begun valuing Rohan as a source of information and had grudgingly agreed. Besides, she figured they could get a lot more out of him, if his parents were gone. Nisha rang the doorbell, and they waited. The doormat was instantly activated, and the door was opened soon after by a man about five and a half feet tall with broad shoulders, a wheatish complexion and a muscular frame.

"I'm Harry," Harish introduced himself, before ushering them to the living room furnished with a white marble coffee table and a gleaming white leather sofa set. The bright white tiles reflected the sunlight coming in through the french windows, forcing Nisha

to squint until she sat down facing the enormous flat screen TV.

"I know it's a little tacky, but my parents like things sparkly," Harish explained, accurately reading the expression on Nisha's face. Cherian however seemed to appreciate it all. "Anyway, I'm so glad you're here. Asif told me that you're the good guys."

Nisha and Cherian were too stunned to react to this completely unexpected welcome, so Harish continued, " I have been so upset ever since her death, but I haven't been able to talk to anyone about it. My parents did not know about our relationship. They wouldn't have approved, because she was so much older than me. They're really old fashioned. Thank goodness you've come. Do you know what happened?" Tears trickled down his thickly bearded face. His dark wavy hair bunched into a ponytail and well groomed beard, both extended a couple of inches below his shoulder blades. He wore a crisply ironed, muted orange, cotton *kurta* with olive green cargo pants and spectacles with round lenses in a dark brown frame.

It took Cherian a few minutes to recover, but she cleared her throat and said, "Harish, I'm going to be asking the questions."

"Harry, please call me Harry. And yes, of course, I totally understand. I'm just glad you're here, and we can talk about it. I'll help in anyway I can. I loved her."

Once again, Cherian cleared her throat. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"On Monday afternoon. We always hooked up in the afternoons, since my parents are at work at that time. I'd normally be heading over there in a couple of hours. I can't believe she's gone. Why haven't you arrested Amit yet, the beast?" His tears were falling thick and fast.

"What makes you think he killed her?" Nisha asked.

"Oh please. Everyone knows he threatened to kill her if his grandma died, didn't he? The animal. I told May to report him. I wish she had taken his threat more seriously. Then she'd still be here." Harish took off his spectacles to wipe his tears.

"May? Who is that?" Cherian demanded.

"That's what I called her. She was so beautiful, even though she never tried to be. You know, she never wore make up." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Her dark curly hair just danced around her face. Her eyes sparkled but there was sadness deep

inside. Her smooth chestnut skin crinkled at the corners of her mouth causing a dimple on her left cheek. God, I'm going to miss her smile." He sighed as a fresh wave of tears gushed down his face.

"How often did you have sex?" Cherian asked unfeelingly.

"That's not a polite question," Harish objected.

"This is a murder investigation, in case you haven't noticed. We don't really care about our manners." Cherian snapped, feeling irritated with the lad's silly shenanigans.

Nisha too would have found him irksome, but Cherian's annoyance amused her. She struggled to control her mirth.

"What has our sex life got to do with anything?" Harish demanded.

"I said, I would ask the questions. Now, how often did you have sex?" Cherian glowered at him.

"Okay, chill. I must say, for good guys, you don't seem too nice," he complained. "I'm in my prime, so about a couple of times a day from Monday to Saturday. My parents are home on Sundays so we had to skip it." He shrugged.

"Since when?" Nisha asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

"Since we started seeing each other five months ago."

"But Maithili was in her mid-thirties. Could she ..." Nisha left the sentence hanging, but Harish knew what she was implying. He smiled.

"May was insatiable. She was young at heart, and her soul was pure. Sex with her was pure ecstasy. And what a body! She was quite sporty you know, so no stamina issues. And so cool. I mean the woman carved stone and used power tools. Totally sexy." His eyes glazed as he looked into the past, and a tiny smile lit up his tear stained face.

Cherian goggled at him dumbstruck. Nisha had to suppress the urge to giggle before asking, "But you were safe, right? I mean you used condoms?"

"Only for the first month. May went on the pill soon after we met, but it takes a while to work properly. It's so much nicer without condoms, and she was wild," he reminisced.

"She was on the pill?" Nisha repeated, and Cherian and she exchanged puzzled looks.

"Yes," Harish hissed, "but what has any of this to do with her murder investigation?" He got up and paced impatiently.

"Everything," Cherian snorted, standing up to meet his eye. "Did you know she was pregnant?"

Harish's jaw dropped. He gaped soundlessly, as if waiting for one of them to declare they were joking. After a couple of minutes, when neither of them did, he sat down and covered his face with his hands. "She said she was on the pill. How can this be?" he mumbled.

"So she never told you she was pregnant?" Nisha ventured.

Harish stared at Nisha. "No, she did not," he blinked.

"And how would you have reacted, if you knew?" Cherian narrowed her eyes.

"I don't know. It's not something I've ever thought about. Would she want to go through with it? I don't know. It would be a discussion. But I never got the chance to find out, did I? I hate Amit. How could he do this to a pregnant woman?"

"To be fair, even if Amit killed her, he didn't know she was pregnant," Nisha pointed out. "It's true." She

shrugged, when Cherian and Harish both glared at her.

"So, Harry, what were you doing between 8:00 and 10:00 yesterday morning?" Cherian asked.

"Me? I was home of course. Why? Wait, am I a suspect?" Harish demanded.

"Of course, you're a suspect! Haven't you watched any crime shows on TV? The boyfriend is always the prime suspect. After what happened with Amit, you were knocked out of the top spot, but then we learned of her pregnancy, and you're back up there. Amit and you are neck and neck in this race, Harry Potter! So do you have an alibi?" Cherian sneered.

"Patel, not Potter," Harish muttered. "And no, I don't have an alibi, because I was home alone playing music. I would have had one ready to present to you, if I had been out committing murder." He snorted.

"Whatever," Cherian handed him a zip-lock bag with a DNA swab stick. "I'm going to need a sample."

"Don't you need a warrant?"

"So you do watch the crime shows. Then you should know that it won't be difficult to get one. You could give it to me now, or later when you're parents are here." She raised her eyebrows.

"That's blackmail." Harish glared, but Cherian shrugged. "Fine," Harish took the bag from Cherian and swabbed the inside of his cheek.

"I'd better put a rush on this," Cherian said, holding up the sample and walking towards the door. Nisha and Harish followed her.

Nisha nodded. "Go ahead. Rohan wanted me to give Harry a pen-drive to load some music. I'll catch up with you later."

"Suit yourself. I'm in a hurry." Cherian pressed the call button for the elevator.

"I'll be back, Harry Potter," she told Harish, before disappearing behind the sliding metal doors.

Nisha turned to face Harish, as she handed him the pen-drive. "Forgive Cherian. She was just doing her job. The system, it demands certain things of her, and Cherian, well, she isn't the most tactful person I know." Nisha shook her head.

"That's an understatement, if I ever heard one. Am I really a suspect? Asif told me how you helped him. I had no reason to kill May. I loved her. How can that possibly be a motive? Our society can be so silly about somethings. So what if she was a ten years older? I honestly did not care."

"You think you're a suspect because of the age difference in your relationship?" Nisha was surprised.

"Then? What else is there?"

"Didn't you hear us tell you she was pregnant?"

"First, I am not sure I believe that. Police can lie. And second, even if it were true, so what? Accidents happen. They can be fixed. All that really mattered is that we loved each other."

"In that case, why didn't you tell your parents?" Nisha asked.

"I wanted to, but I had told May that I knew they wouldn't approve. Our love was still new and magical. She begged me to wait a few months, so we could enjoy a blissful romance before having to deal with the ugliness of reality. She was so beautiful inside out!"

"Could your parents have somehow found out you were having sex with Maithili?" Nisha asked.

"Nope, not possible!" Harish declared.

Nisha was puzzled. "How can you be so sure? I mean, while you may not have told your parents, others knew. Someone could have told your parents. Even if

your friends kept your secret, there were others who knew, like one of Maithili's neighbors for example."

"That nosy lady, always peeking out from the opposite door. Some people have way too much time on their hands. I guess she would cause me trouble if she could, but I don't think she had figured out who I was, or where I lived. You see, I keep pretty strange hours because of my job, so most people here don't know me."

"I was only citing her as an example. There could be others who knew."

"Yes, of course. I am sure many knew, but I am certain none of them told my parents. You misunderstand me. I don't think it is impossible for the news to have reached my parents. I just know it didn't, because I know them. They would have confronted me, if it had. They're no good at keeping secrets."

"Is there anyone else Maithili was close to? Anyone who might be able to shed some light on what happened?"

"Everyone knows what happened. Amit is crazy. He killed her. She told him it was an accident, but he killed her anyway. May was friendly with her other neighbor. The one who lived on the other side of the elevator. I don't know why. The woman was quite

boring. But May seemed to love the child. Anyway, perhaps that woman saw or heard something. I don't know."

"How old is the child?"

"How should I know? It can't walk, so I guess less than a year. They can walk after a year, right?" Harish shrugged. "May would buy it lots of gifts. She even made some toys for it."

"It?" Nisha stared.

"Well, I have no idea, if it was a girl or a boy. I rarely paid attention when May spoke of it. Bored me to tears."

"What about the fourth flat on the floor? Do you know who lives there?"

"That one is empty. I think it has been, for a while."

"What about the cyclist kid? Was Maithili worried about the mother?"

"Not really. May wished the parents would co-operate. But she understood their reluctance. No offense to your friend, but no one wants to get their kid involved with the police, if they can help it."

"True." Nisha conceded. "Maithili was my friend. I met her only a few times, but I had grown fond of her. The police have reason to believe her murderer may be someone other than Amit. Whoever it is, I am going to try to get to the bottom of it. If you remember anything that may be useful to the investigation, do let me know." Nisha took out a piece of paper from her handbag, scribbled her phone number and address on it and handed it to Harish. "I know you don't trust the police, but Cherian has come a long way and learned some humanity over the last couple of years. Her heart is in the right place."

Harish took the paper and put it in one of his many pant pockets. He nodded and followed Nisha to the door. As Nisha slipped on her shoes, she remembered something. "Do you know what happened between Maithili and Nina?"

"The dragon lady?" Harish raised his eyebrows as Nisha opened the door. "Everybody hates her, but she can cause a lot of problems, so most people just abide by her rules. To be fair, she does a lot for the society, but she is way too anal. May had an argument with her about trash disposal."

"Do you know what really happened? I heard things got quite explosive." Nisha leaned against the door frame.

"She interrupted May while she was working. That's a really bad idea. May would get so engrossed in her work, she would be completely lost to the world. I always thought that story of Arjun, Dronacharya and the clay pigeon was a bit silly, but only until I saw May at work. All her senses would engage with single minded focus on her work. Nina yanked her out very suddenly, and I don't think May was quite sane at that moment. Goodness knows what she said or did. I guess it was all in the video. But the thing is, it passes quickly with her. Her outbursts are... I mean were .... short and intense. She never held a grudge. Life's too short for stuff like that, she always said."

"What about Nina? Would she hold a grudge?"

"Oh yeah. Absolutely." Harish nodded. "She can be quite petty."

"Okay, thanks for your help." Nisha straightened up.

Harish nodded and waved goodbye, as Nisha waited for the elevator. But instead of heading home, she went to the podium level, where as decided in advance, Cherian was waiting for her so they could go together to meet Maithili's neighbor.

"My assistant came and picked up the DNA sample. It's already on its way to the lab. So what did he say after I left?" Cherian asked, and Nisha filled her in.

"Do you believe him?" Cherian asked. "I mean, did he really not know she was pregnant?" Cherian asked, parking herself on a bench next to the football field.

"I don't know, Amy. It's difficult to say. He seemed too eager to blame Amit. It could be genuine anger for someone he believed killed his girlfriend, or it could be desperation to channel away suspicion. I mean he sounded almost whinny. I don't know him well enough to be able to tell which it is more likely to be." Nisha plonked down on the bench next to her.

"What about Maithili? You knew her a little. Do you think she would have told him?" Cherian asked.

"I think she would have told him, but I'm not clear on the when. I mean, do we even know if she herself knew?"

Cherian smiled. "I took your advice, went up and took a quick look around her apartment again. She wrote some poetry and stuff, which I haven't got around to reading, but there may be some clues there. God, I hate poetry. One other thing that caught my eye, was a book in the stack on her dressing table."

"The Victorian romance? What's the big deal in that? Lots of people like the genre."

"No, that's fine. But two below it in the stack, was a parenting book."

"Parenting?" Nisha blinked. "Why?"

"Beats me." Cherian shrugged.

"Wait, maybe, it was for her neighbor's kid. Harish mentioned she was very fond of the neighbor's baby. Maybe, she got it for advice with babysitting?" Nisha suggested. "Or," Nisha stopped in her tracks.

"Or what?" Cherian asked.

"Nothing," Nisha shook her head. *What are the odds,* she recalled Rohan asking when Priya had entered. *Just like then, could this situation too have little to do with chance,* she wondered. "Let's go talk to the neighbor," she said out loud.

"Just what I was going to suggest," Cherian nodded, leading the way to Maithili's building. "Oh wait." Nisha hadn't noticed the notebook Cherian had been clutching until she handed it to her. "Her poems," Cherian explained. "I was hoping you would read them, in case they offer any insight for the case. I don't get poetry at all."

"It's not really my thing either, but I'll try." Nisha agreed, as they entered the elevator.

Nisha followed Cherian out of the elevator and waited as she rang the doorbell.

A ear-splitting scream rent the air prompting Nisha to stuff her index fingers into her ears. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed as the door was opened by an irate woman in a blue nightgown. Her disheveled hair and the dark circles under her eyes indicated she might have been trying to get some sleep. In her arms, she cradled a squirming infant, emitting the noise Nisha was trying to shield her ears from.

"Sorry to disturb you Ma'am," Cherian shouted, to make herself heard over the baby's screaming. The woman glared at her.

"Here, allow me," Nisha extended her arms, offering to carry the baby.

The tired, haggard woman scowled at her and then gave in. Nisha took the baby and rocked it. After a minute of jiggling and shaking, she got it to calm down. "How did you do that?" the woman demanded.

"The gentle movement helps calm them. At least, that's what I've learned from experience," Nisha explained holding the baby snugly close to her chest with its head resting on the front of her shoulder as she rocked to-and-fro. "They love body warmth too. Oh you little darling. Aren't you a little cutie? A sweetie,

"honey little darling," Nisha cooed into its ears. The baby gurgled.

Cherian stared at her baffled, while the baby's mom goggled at her. "What? I miss babies. They're so cuddly, aren't you, Sweetie?" Nisha caressed the baby's cheek. "What's the darling's name?"

"Ruchi, and I'm Sunaina," the woman mumbled irritably. "Please come in," she added, suddenly remembering her manners. "I'm so sorry, but I haven't had much sleep the last couple of nights. I'm not very good with her." She led Nisha and Cherian to the living room cluttered with dirty dishes and piles of dirty laundry. "I'm sorry. Everything is such a mess. I just don't know how to be a mom."

"Don't worry, Honey. It takes a while to crack it, but we all figure it out. You'll be fine. Is your husband out of town?" Nisha inquired.

"He works in the Merchant Navy. He has been away for three months and will be for another three months." She looked like she was going to dissolve into tears. "This is the first time he has been away since Ruchi was born. She's six months now. I'm a terrible mother. I get so livid when she cries incessantly." Sunaina's eyes smouldered. "It drives me totally crazy! Arrgh! I'm horrible." Cherian was shocked by the way Sunaina spoke about her own

baby, but Nisha sympathized. She recalled just how stressful and overwhelming it was to be a new mother.

She rocked Ruchi to sleep, then moved aside a few clothes and cleared some space on the sofa where she gently set her down. Nisha found a couple of cushions and put them next to Ruchi to prevent her from rolling off the sofa. "You'll be fine, Sweetie. We all manage," she added, giving Sunaina a hug.

"No, I won't. I don't know what to do. She used to help me so much. She was good with her. But now she is gone." Sunaina sobbed. "What am I going to do?" She clutched her hair and squeezed her eyes shut, as copious tears gushed down her cheeks.

Cherian looked at Nisha in dismay. She hadn't spoken a word. Squirming with discomfort, her eyes darted from one part of the room to another in search of an escape route. She gulped and looked at Nisha again. Nisha nodded, struggling to stifle a laugh. "I'll manage, you can leave", she mouthed soundlessly, and Cherian slinked away hurriedly, in case Nisha changed her mind, or the woman opened her eyes.

"Who used to help you so much, Dear? Your mother? Has she gone back home now?" Nisha asked.

"No. My mother is long dead," Sunaina blubbered. "Maithili used to help me. She was so good with

Ruchi. How am I going to manage now?" She howled.

"Sush Sunaina, you'll wake Ruchi up. Come here." Nisha gave Sunaina a hug and patted her back. "I'll talk to my friend Sachi. She might know someone who can help you. It's difficult for young mothers without a support system."

Sunaina stiffened. "No, thank you. I'm not crazy or depressed. Just tired. I don't need any nosy people coming here and messing with my mind. I'll manage fine."

"I don't think you're crazy." Nisha was taken aback by her chilling tone. "I just meant, she might know some social worker who can help you implement a regular routine with Ruchi, sleep train her and such, so it is not so stressful for you." Nisha pressed her hand.

Sunaina's expression softened. "Okay, I could use a little help. I really am clueless when it comes to babies. I always thought mothers just know. My own died when I was five. I was brought up by my grandma. She's very nice, but it's not the same."

"I understand, Honey." Nisha collected and stacked some dirty dishes. "Plus, it must be hard losing a friend. How long have you known Maithili?"

"Not that long. A couple of weeks after Kartik, my husband, left, I was a mess. Ruchi was driving me crazy. She missed her Papa, and I was stuck with all the housework too. The cook took a week off and never came back. Everything was falling apart. Ruchi was screaming, and the milk in the kitchen had boiled over. There was an ever growing pile of laundry from dirty napkins, sheets and clothes stinking of spit-up, and I screamed out loud in anger and banged my fist on the door in frustration. Then I was so embarrassed. It was 2:00 in the afternoon, so I hoped all the neighbors were at work and no one had heard me. Just then, there was a knock on my door. I was so scared that someone was going to report me as crazy, but there stood Maithili, smiling. She calmed Ruchi down, helped me clean up and talked to me. It was so nice to have some adult company after so long. I didn't even realize until then, how much I missed it"

"Yeah, it's tough to be the only caregiver to an infant. Why don't you hire some help?" Nisha asked walking over to the kitchen and soaking the dirty dishes.

"I'm new in Mumbai, and I am not very comfortable with domestic help. I grew up in a joint family, and we all pitched in. Housework did not feel so overwhelming since we shared the responsibilities and usually had company doing it. It was never lonely, like it is here. I hired a cook, because I was finding it

difficult to cope, and just as I was getting used to her, she ditched me. It's not something I want to deal with at the moment." Sunaina explained collecting glasses and cups.

Nisha nodded. "No worries. Ruchi looks like such an angel asleep. Did she like Maithili?" Nisha asked, picking up the dirty clothes surrounding the sleeping baby. "Where should I put these?"

Sunaina pointed to the washing machine in the dry area next to the kitchen. "Yes, Maithili would carry her and prance around to music and make toys for her." Sunaina followed Nisha with an armful of dirty clothes and put them into the washing machine. When she returned for the next load, she pointed at little animals sculpted out of marble, granite, clay, wood and wax, lying on the coffee table. "She insisted Ruchi would enjoy the textures and shapes. I guess she was right, because these are her favorite toys. She keeps clutching them, and running her fingers along the surfaces." Tears rolled down Sunaina's cheeks. "I can't believe she is gone!" She sat down on the sofa next to the sleeping Ruchi.

"Me neither. I only just got to know her a couple of weeks ago. We used to skate, and that's how I met her." Nisha said, picking up a squeaky toy from the chair before sitting down on it.

Sunaina stiffened. "That got her in a lot of trouble. I heard Amit shouting at her. Poor Maithili. Even though she did nothing wrong, she couldn't help feeling bad."

"You heard Amit?" Nisha asked.

Sunaina nodded. "Yeah, he was so angry. His eyes were bloodshot, and he shouted and waved his fist at her. Scary sight. I came out to see what was happening, but then all the noise upset Ruchi, and I had to rush back in."

"Did you hear or see anyone on the day she died?" Nisha asked.

"No. Ruchi had been colicky and kept me up the previous night, so I was fast asleep."

"Didn't the noise from Maithili's stone carving machine bother you? Especially since she kept her door open while working?" Nisha was curious.

"Oh no, that's a fairly constant sound. With our door closed, it faded into the background, like white noise."

"Right, makes sense." Nisha nodded. "Did Maithili ever mention her boyfriend?"

"Harish, yes, they were cute together." Sunaina smiled.

"You don't think he was too young for her?"

"He was happy and made her happy, so why should I judge? Poor Maithili lost her husband so early. She was lonely that way, you know." Nisha frowned, so Sunaina looked at her significantly and winked.

"Oh, I see." Nisha nodded finally catching on. "Did they ever fight, or did she say anything about a disagreement?"

"No. She loved hanging out with him. I could tell by the way they laughed together. Only once, she said she regretted never having kids. I could see how much she loved kids in her interactions with Ruchi. Poor lady, if anyone deserved to be a mother, it was her. That's when I wondered why she did not find someone who might want kids too. I mean, Harish obviously did not. He's only in his twenties. I guess love works in mysterious ways. There is no logic to it."

"Yeah, no logic," Nisha nodded and stopped in her tracks, wondering if beneath that artsy exterior, Maithili was indeed driven by cold hard logic. Cherian would be able to provide the information she needed. She looked at her watch. It was 1:00 already. She was supposed to tutor Radhika at 2:00. "I have an

appointment in the afternoon, and I must have some lunch before that, so I need to leave. But I'll ask Sachi, if there is anything she can do to help, and please call me if you need anything, anything at all," Nisha rifled through her handbag, pulled out a small piece of paper and a pencil. She scribbled down her phone number. "You can reach me here. Good luck with Ruchi. Just cuddle her. It's the best way to calm babies and enjoy motherhood." Nisha smiled and stood up to leave.

"Thank you. The room looks so much better," Sunaina remarked, confused by Nisha's abrupt declaration, as she walked her to the door.

As soon as Sunaina closed the door, Nisha took out her phone and shot a message to Cherian. A fledgling of theory had been brewing in her head for a while, and Sunaina's comment had clarified a lot of the haze. She just needed one more piece of information, and then she would know if she was on the right track.

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Nisha wished Cherian would reply quickly. All she wanted was a simple confirmation, but perhaps Cherian had not seen her message yet. Or maybe, the doctor wasn't available.

Nisha had set Radhika some problems in which she had to calculate the partial pressure of various gases.

"How does the presence of PM10 or even PM2.5 particles affect the partial pressures or gases? Does one add in the partial pressure due to the particulates?" Radhika asked, thinking of the headline news about the air quality in Delhi.

"Hmm.." Nisha had been so distracted, she hadn't even heard the question. Puzzled, Radhika repeated her question. As Nisha answered, trying hard to focus on the science, she could not help imagining the tiny dust particles that had been flying thick in the air when Maithili was murdered. Cherian had said that Maithili was wearing protective gear like earmuffs, goggles and a mask. Yet, they had failed to protect her.

It must have been so easy to sneak up behind her with all that noise from the power tools, and with her wearing protective earmuffs. Even if it was only white noise to Sunaina, Maithili would never have heard her murderer approaching. In fact, she might have died, not even knowing who had killed her.

After Radhika left, Nisha rang her neighbor's doorbell. "Nisha! So who's in trouble with the police, this time?" Sachi's eyes twinkled.

"How did you know?" Nisha asked, stepping into Sachi's apartment.

"I've come to recognize your expression and body language, when you come over for help with a case," Sachi winked.

Nisha frowned and then glared at Sachi. Finally, she shrugged. "Oh well, it's a good thing I don't play poker."

"So what's up? Is this about Maithili?"

"Not quite Ms. Know-It-All." Nisha quipped.  
"Actually, it has nothing to do with the case." Nisha smiled. "I was talking to Maithili's neighbor, Sunaina, just to find out if she had seen anything."

"Well, did her beautiful eyes see anything?" Sachi chuckled.

"Huh?" Nisha was puzzled.

"Sunaina means beautiful eyes," Sachi explained.

"That's a terrible joke." Nisha rolled her eyes.  
"Anyway, Sunaina has a six month old baby. Her husband is in the Merchant Navy. He has been away for a while and will be gone for some more time. I think she is overwhelmed all alone with the baby. Can you help her?"

"Yes, of course. Ritu volunteers her services to help struggling single mothers. She has trained for the role. Just text me Sunaina's address and inform her that Ritu will be visiting her between 9:00 and 10:00 in the morning tomorrow."

"Ritu, wow! It has been a while since I have heard from her. I must call her soon. Thanks Sachi. You rock."

"Not at jokes, apparently." Sachi grumbled, as Nisha's phone beeped. "You're checking your messages?" Sachi fumed. "You complain that it is rude to do so in company. What am I, chopped liver?"

"I am so sorry Sachi. My curiosity got the better of me, and I apologize, but I was just dying to know what Cherian had found out."

"Cherian," Sachi smiled. "How is she?"

"Growing up fast," Nisha responded, and they laughed.

"I'm glad. So what's this message you were so eager to read?" Sachi waggled her eyebrows.

"Do you know a Harish Patel?" Nisha asked.

"You mean the son of Ronak Patel, the restaurant magnate?" When Nisha nodded, Sachi continued, "For over a decade, Ronak has owned a score of high-end restaurants and several hundred small and medium price range restaurants and eateries in Mumbai and Delhi. He has been featured by various media outlets I have worked for. But his son Harish wanted to experiment with the idea of introducing entertainment."

"You mean, comedy night? Like on those American TV shows?" Nisha was intrigued.

"Sort of, but since these were high-end restaurants, he wasn't looking for budding local talent, but full fledged celebrities. There's no shortage of them, here in Mumbai. With his father's connections, he was able to enlist several celebrities for the opening week."

"Did it work out?"

"A couple of the restaurants, one in BKC (Bandra Kurla Complex), and one in Colaba were renovated to accommodate a small stage area for performances. But they didn't skimp on the sound systems. Harish created the right ambiance by lining the walls with paintings by well known artists. I've seen one of Maithili's paintings in their Bandra restaurant. I guess he had the timing right, because the restaurants became very popular, especially after all the press coverage of the

opening week. Thereafter, on weekends he has been booking A-list celebrities and on weekdays the B-list ones. Music, songs, dance, comedy, mimes, skits, are all featured. The restaurants also foster networking between the performers and the businessmen who dine there. Needless to say, the prices are exorbitant, and there is an entry fee of some sort as well."

"Wow! Harish did not seem so sophisticated when I met him."

"The idea was his of course, but he executes it with the help of a competent team put together by his dad. It's to his credit though, that he follows their advice and encourages their input."

"How do you know that?"

"We featured his restaurants in one of our magazines. So my team conducted in depth interviews of him and his employees."

"Prime Time Media did a feature? I must look it up. But don't they put up a show for your team? I mean how much do you really get to know from a few interviews? They tell you whatever sells, right?"

"Although we may not print everything we learn, I assure you, we are very thorough in our research," was Sachi's cold response.

"Sorry Sachi. I apologize. I just meant, they would only present their best side and hide any issues or problems, wouldn't they?" Nisha persisted.

"True," Sachi sounded mollified, "but with my experience, I can usually read between the lines, and when we do a feature, my team digs pretty deep. As I said, we don't print everything, but we convey an accurate overall picture."

"You said you saw Maithili's painting in the Bandra restaurant. Was this when you did the feature?"

"No, that was more than a year ago. I saw Maithili's painting just a few months ago." Sachi's brows furrowed as she tried to recall, "I guess three months ago."

"Did you know Maithili?"

"Sadly, no. Her painting caught my eye, and because of the feature article I had done, the staff knew me well. So I asked them about the artist. They gave me her contact details right away. Imagine my surprise when I learned she lived in the neighboring society. It's such a small world. I had planned to go introduce myself and perhaps do an interview or article about her art. Now ..." Sachi shrugged.

"Is that normal?" Nisha's was curious. "I mean to share her contact information, or did they just do that for you?"

"Actually, they gave me Maithili's business card and a flier containing thumbnail pictures and information about her most popular prints."

"Oh?" Nisha raised her eyebrows.

"I learned that Harish convinces artists to sell him their paintings at a quarter of the asking price. The paintings are prominently displayed in the restaurant for at least four months, and the front desk hands out business cards or brochures supplied by the artist when a customer shows interest in any painting. If a painting attracts a lot of attention, it stays on for longer. It's a win-win. Harish can keep his decor fresh and classy for a steal, and the artists get what they need most, publicity. I must admit he has good taste. Several artists have reported a significant bump in recognition and sales after he displays one of their paintings."

"What happens to the painting after the four months?" Nisha wondered, for even at quarter price, good artwork would be quite expensive.

"I was curious too, so I asked, especially since I had no idea about it when I did the interviews. I found out

that he came up with this idea a few months after I did my research. Some paintings, Harish adds to his personal art collection. The rest he sells, usually at a significant profit, for the value appreciates measurably from being displayed in the restaurant. The deal is, he pays the artist half the profit he makes."

"Interesting business model. Smart and creative. I didn't expect it of him."

"Don't let his hippie appearance fool you. He has a shrewd business mind, listens to his advisers and loves his work."

"What are his parents like?"

"I did interview Ronak a couple of times over the years. He's a self made man, adventurous in business, but conservative in his personal life. He's a strict vegetarian and a teetotaler. But tell me, what has any of this got to do with the message you just received from Cherian."

"Harish and Maithili were secretly seeing each other. Now it turns out Maithili is pregnant, and from my interactions with Harish, I got the impression, he definitely isn't ready for fatherhood. So he's a prime suspect."

"Oh, come on! There are easier ways around this than murder."

"You mean an abortion?" Nisha raised her eyebrows.

"Well, yeah, or even child support, or giving up the child for adoption."

"The thing is, I think Maithili wanted the baby and tricked Harish." Nisha bit her lips.

"What do you mean?" Sachi stared.

"Well," Nisha pressed her lips together and sighed. Sachi was looking at her expectantly, so she continued, "Harish was sure that Maithili was using birth control pills. But I had a hunch something was not right, so I asked Cherian to get some information from Maithili's gynecologist. The message she sent me says, Maithili had got a complete check up and asked for birth control pills when she had started dating Harish, but stopped using them a couple of months later."

"How could her gynecologist know that?"

"Since it was the first time Maithili was to be using the pills, her gynecologist prescribed only enough pills for a couple of months and scheduled another visit after that to find out how they affected her periods.

But when Maithili went for the second check up three months ago, she told her doctor that she did not want to continue the pills, as she wanted to try to get pregnant. The doctor administered some more tests and gave her the green light."

Sachi's jaw dropped. "No way! So you think she told Harish about the pregnancy, he asked her to abort and she refused, so..."

Nisha shrugged. Then she looked at her watch and jumped. "Goodness, Raj will be home in a few minutes. I need to get dinner heated. But thanks so much for all the information."

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That evening as Nisha and Raj had dinner together, she told him all about her eventful day.

"So Harry Potter is your prime suspect, then. But why did you expect the pregnancy, and ask Cherian to find out about the pills from her gynecologist?"

"I had a hunch when both Harish and Sunaina told me how much Maithili liked playing with the baby. Perhaps, she did not want to ever marry again, for she was still too much in love with Vikram, but maybe, she still wanted to experience motherhood. I mean, then, a young healthy man with a practical attitude,

good business sense and a hint of idealism would be perfect, right?"

"Yikes Nish. You sound like you're advertising a product. She can't have been so diabolical. I would prefer think she just took advantage of an opportunity that presented itself, rather than deliberately sought him out for selfish reasons." Raj picked up his empty plate and took it to the sink.

"Maybe, but we'll never know. It makes sense doesn't it?" Nisha asked, following him to the kitchen.

"Come on Nisha. Don't let solving mysteries make you so cynical. She may have realized she could finally have a baby with a man she loved. But she assumed that being so practical, he would not agree to it. So she decided to tragically go it alone, knowing that even if this broke them apart, she would still have his baby." Raj raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Raj, you're such a romantic." Nisha rolled her eyes. "You should write poetry. Oh wait, I guess we could find out. Cherian wanted me to look at some poems Maithili wrote in a notebook. Maybe, that will give me an idea. People in love always write poetry."

Raj smiled. "Much better Nish. What did you say Harish called her? May, right? Well you can

investigate their May-December romance before bed, tonight." He winked, as he headed for the bedroom.

"Oh you evil man. You don't care an iota about my cynicism. You've just been waiting to use that pun. I can't believe I married you." Nisha grumbled, searching for a toffee to satisfy her sweet tooth.

"Oh yes you can," Raj called out, as he changed into his bed clothes. Nisha narrowed her eyes every time she heard him laugh.

## Four Suspects and a Funeral

Nisha flipped through the pages of Maithili's poetry notebook in bed. She read a couple, but they made no sense to her. *Poetry is so personal*, she thought, as she yawned. Raj was already snoring. It had been a tiring day and her eyelids drooped. She was just about to turn off the lights, when she decided to check out the date on the last poem. It had been penned merely three months ago, but it was the exact date that struck her. Among other details, Cherian had messaged her the date of Maithili's last gynecologist visit, and this was written the day before that.

Could this hold the clue as to what Maithili was thinking when she chose to stop taking her birth control pills, Nisha wondered as she read.

*Cruel time, cruel fate,*

*make me long for a mate.*

*Twice cupid, you've struck me so,*

*causing much pain and sorrow.*

*Love so intense, yet so calming,  
cruelly snatched, without warning.*

*Never imagined, I would recover  
and open my heart to another.*

*I did, and now everything is falling apart again ...*

*Conflicting desires torment my brain,  
a ticking clock and a heart in pain,  
torn asunder, I surrender, in shame,  
fully knowing I deserve disdain.*

*The love of a partner,  
I sacrifice in misery,  
so an offspring's love,*

*won't be unknown to me.*

Nisha stared as the words attempting to justify Maithili's actions followed by tear stains. "Hmph, so Raj was right," Nisha grumbled to herself. Maithili had known Harry would not want a child, but her biological clock was ticking. Apparently, Maithili loved Harry, but had decided to deceive him anyway. How would Harry have reacted to that, if he had known, Nisha wondered.

Nisha had always unequivocally supported a woman's right to choose and championed a woman's autonomy over her body, but for the first time, doubt crept into her heart. Perhaps, Maithili felt entitled. After all, fate had been cruel to her. But Harry had no choice or say in the matter. If Maithili decided to go through with the pregnancy, he would either have to be an absent dad, which might haunt him, or undertake fatherhood forced upon him through willful deception. Perhaps he murdered her in a fit of rage.

Nisha's phone beeped drawing her out of her reverie. It was a message from Priya. Maithili's body had been released from police custody that evening. Priya had been busy arranging the funeral. It was to take place the next morning at 10:30. Priya had already informed

Maithili's in-laws that she would be picking them up from their home at 9:30.

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At 10:45, Nisha pulled into the parking lot of the crematorium. She had barely exited the car and closed the door, when Cherian pounced on her. "Why are you so late? Lata and her husband arrived a while ago. Should I tell them about the pregnancy? How do I do it?" Cherian bit her lip.

Nisha stared blankly. She hadn't even thought about this. How would they react? What would they feel? What good could come of telling them? "I don't know," Nisha shook her head, miserably. "Wouldn't they find out, eventually?" She looked at Cherian.

"Probably," Cherian nodded, "especially with the murder investigation going on, it's going to be impossible to keep it quiet. So they'll have to know, but the question is, should I say something right now?"

"Now? Good heavens! Why?" Nisha asked, wondering why Cherian would pick such an awkward time.

"Well," Cherian hesitated, "um, what if the last rites are different for pregnant women?" I don't want them

to feel upset about doing this wrong." Cherian stole a guilty glance at Lata and her husband.

"I don't think it matters. She was barely a few weeks pregnant. The fetus would be too small for separate burial, wouldn't it? No. Let them mourn their beloved daughter-in-law without tainting their feelings. This is not the place, Cherian."

"Burial? You mean separate cremation, right?"

"No, according to Hindu practices, a fetus or child under the age of two years is buried, not cremated. At least, I think that is the case," Nisha frowned. "Either way, this fetus is too small. I don't know how they will handle the news, but I don't think it is fair to tell them here in the middle of the ritual."

Cherian nodded, visibly relieved. Nisha walked up to Lata and gave her a hug. She shook hands with the old man and led them both to chairs right next to Maithili's body, but they both chose to sit cross legged on the floor. Nisha marveled at their fitness, as the priest guided them through the rituals. Not many people at their age, or for that matter, even her own age could sit cross legged on the floor for an extended period. Nisha wondered if she herself could do it. She resolved to practice, for she was aware of several studies extolling the health benefits of sitting on the floor.

Nisha spotted Priya standing next to a tall, slender, middle aged woman, with short, salt and pepper hair in a white *salwar kameez* and walked up to her.

"Nisha." Priya smiled. "This is Nina. She helped me make all the arrangements here."

"That's very kind of you." Nisha shook hands with Nina. "I am Nisha from the society next to yours."

"Oh yes, I have seen you around. You train with Ankita, right? Aren't you the detective who solved the case of Saloni's death?"

Nisha blushed. "I'm hardly a detective. I was just helping a friend out of a tight spot."

"Don't be modest, Nisha" Priya objected. "She's a regular Miss Marple, if you ask me." She gushed, when someone tapped her shoulder and whispered something. Priya nodded. "Excuse me, the *pundit* needs my attention, so I must go." She began to walk away, but suddenly turned back, "Nina, I keep forgetting to ask. Did you give the new shovel to the gardener? I need to supervise the planting of the flower bed. We haven't fixed that, since the plants died in the last cyclone."

"Yes, I dropped it off in the storage room on Tuesday morning at 8:00, just like I had promised." Nina called

out. Priya gave her a thumbs up from a distance and hurried towards the priest.

"Did you know Maithili well?" Nisha asked, when Nina turned back to face her.

"Wait, you're working this case too, aren't you?" Nina smiled. "Well, to answer your question, I'm afraid not, and the few interactions we had, were hostile." Nina sighed. "I'm quite OCD about stuff. While I still believe people should follow the rules, which are made for everyone's safety and comfort, I suppose I shouldn't have publicly shared that video of Maithili losing her temper. I too tend to lose my temper pretty spectacularly sometimes, so I feel ashamed. I wanted to apologize, but put it off and ..." she shook her head. "I'm sorry Maithili," she whispered looking up at the sky.

"Nina, hello, it has been a long time," a voice called out.

"Oh, hello Jyotsna. This is Nisha." Nina was about to introduce her to a stout woman Nisha gauged was a few years younger than herself.

"I know," Jyotsna nodded, eagerly extending her hand to shake. "I live opposite Maithili's apartment. I've seen you with the police. Have you figured out who the murderer is yet?" Jyotsna's eyes sparkled.

"No," Nisha shook her head, amused. "I was just trying to help Cherian with any information she needed. Why, do you know something that might help?" she added conspiratorially.

"Me? No, no," Jyotsna giggled. "But Nina must have been the last person to see her alive. I heard her shouting at Maithili about the garbage at around 9:00 that morning. Then, almost an hour later, a little before 10:00, when I had finished my morning chores, I heard a piercing scream. I stepped out to find out what was going on. The two housekeeping men who collect the garbage looked at me and then wordlessly pointed at Maithili's door. I was surprised to see the door open, but not a sound coming from inside. Intrigued, I peeked in. That's when I saw her lying on the floor, her eyes wide open, staring. I screamed and called the police."

Nisha looked at Nina, who was fidgeting. "Yes, you're right. I must have been the last to see her alive. I came by to do my usual weekly rounds. I saw Maithili's garbage outside. I began yelling, but then I saw her working. Recalling the unpleasantness of our previous interaction, I decided to come at a later time and try to reason with her. Excuse me, I think Priya needs my help," Nina left responding to Priya's hails.

"Maithili started working that early? I thought artists were late risers." Nisha asked Jyotsna.

"Oh yeah. The noise from her work didn't really bother me or Sunaina, but it did bug my husband. He is very sensitive to noise. We had to get double glass installed in all our windows, to block out the traffic noise from the highway." Jyotsna rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, so he had spoken to her about it, soon after she had started her sculpting work over a year ago. She had agreed do her sculpting work between 8:00 in the morning and 6:00 in the evening on weekdays. If my husband was home on a weekday, he would inform her, and she would not work that day unless it was something urgent. Though of course, off late, she wasn't doing much work in the afternoon, as I told your policewoman friend," Jyotsna winked. Nisha remembered she was the one who had told Cherian about Harish. "So in the last three months, she would start her sculpting work at 8:00 sharp and work hard at it till a little after noon."

"But didn't the noise of the power tool disturb you?" Nisha asked. "I mean you live right opposite her, and she would leave her door open, I am told."

"Not as long as my door was closed. It's a fairly constant kind of sound, so you stop noticing it after sometime. Her hammering though did bother me

sometimes." Jyotsna frowned. "God, the loud banging at irregular intervals was so freaking annoying, but she didn't do too much of it, and it almost never lasted too long, fifteen minutes tops, so it was fine with me. She was hammering especially loudly soon after my husband left, on the morning she was killed. I remember, because the first bang was so loud, it startled me, and I nicked my finger while chopping a cucumber for my breakfast sandwich."

"Ouch." Nisha sympathized.

"Yes," Jyotsna sighed, pleased by Nisha's concern and continued, "There was blood on my T-shirt, so I ate my sandwich quickly and hurried off to take a shower. Then I remembered that it was a Tuesday. I always wash my hair on Tuesdays and Fridays." She pulled her luxuriously thick dark plait to her front, waved it about and smiled. "So my bath took a while."

"How long?" Nisha asked, looking suitably impressed as Jyotsna flicked the plait back again.

"It was Tuesday, so I did not have to oil my hair. I do that on Fridays. Almost half an hour, I guess. Anyway, when I was back, the banging was done. Phew! I thought I'd get some quiet time to read the paper, but barely fifteen minutes or so later, Nina was yelling. I thought I wouldn't have any peace if the two of them started a shouting match again, but then, as Nina said,

she left. I finished a bit of my Sudoku puzzle and then went to attend to the rest of my morning chores."

"But did you hear anyone in between? I mean after Nina left, but before you responded to the screaming men from housekeeping?"

"No. Not while I was doing my Sudoku, but later I was in the kitchen for most of the time. Lots of noises there from the pressure cooker, the blender and even the exhaust fan. So that may not mean much." Jyotsna shrugged.

"Right," Nisha nodded.

"Sunaina, you came!" Jyotsna called out, waving enthusiastically. Nisha turned to see a dainty woman in starched white saree with a pale green border. Nisha had to stare to discern the resemblance she bore to the disheveled and sleep deprived woman she had seen the previous day. "Where is Ruchi?" Jyotsna asked puzzled.

"Long story, I'll explain later." Sunaina pointed to Ritu standing under a tree at a distance holding baby Ruchi. She turned her attention to Nisha who had no trouble recognizing her voice. "Thank you. It means a lot to me to be here." Sunaina smiled. "Your friend came last night itself. She is an angel, and I have discovered the magical healing powers of an uninterrupted bath and a

good night's sleep. Apparently, a little make up can do wonders for dark circles, but it will be a while before they disappear the healthy way. Ritu is helping me figure out a workable schedule."

Sunaina walked over to Maithili's body and read out something she had written up in a whisper. Then, after checking with the priest, she put the folded paper on the bamboo stretcher on which Maithili was laid down looking serene as ever. A tear trickling down her cheek, Sunaina took a deep breath and then walked away. Slowly everyone else approached Maithili's body and spoke a few private words. Nisha recognized Harish and nodded at him. "I wish I had known you longer," Nisha whispered, when it was her turn. Finally, Lata and her husband placed their hands on Maithili's forehead and whispered goodbye, as tears gushed down their cheeks.

Once Maithili's body was in the electric chamber, Priya convinced Lata and her husband to go home and rest. She promised to bring them her ashes once the cremation was complete.

Cherian walked up to Nisha. "Was the poetry book any help?"

"Sort of," Nisha nodded and told Cherian what she had learned from it.

"That's cold and unfeeling, right? I'd be pretty mad, if I was Harish."

"Me too," Nisha agreed. "I wonder what happened that morning. Perhaps, Maithili had called Harish to inform him of her pregnancy and her plans to keep the baby."

"Wait," Cherian interrupted. "Wouldn't she do that in person? I mean, they were supposed to meet in the afternoon, anyway."

"No. I don't think so." Nisha shook her head. "She wouldn't want to face him when she told him. It would be easier on the phone. She might have even confessed to have planned it all along, when he begged her to abort. I mean, we know how he really feels about kids. Remember how he kept referring to Ruchi as *it* and telling us how boring he thought babies were."

"You're right, but from disliking babies to murdering a pregnant girlfriend is quite a leap, isn't it?"

"Sure, but it's likely that in an effort to ignore the guilty feeling gnawing at her gut, Maithili might have immersed herself in work. Perhaps, Harry had gone there wanting to talk. But seeing her engrossed in work, for him, may have been the last straw. Enraged by her betrayal and lack of sensitivity, while the

jarring noise of the stone cutting power tool messed with his fragile mind, he must have just picked up a hammer lying on the floor and whacked her head. Perhaps he had left in a trance with the hammer, before he even realized what he had done." Nisha looked questioningly at Cherian.

Cherian shrugged. "Could be, but it seems unlikely to be a hammer. Whatever it was, had a larger surface. Even the flat end of the hammer would have left a circular impression, the coroner tells me. Oh, and I looked up that annoying stone cutting tool on the internet. Apparently, it is called an angle grinder."

"Hmm, good to know." Nisha mumbled. "The weapon has been the most puzzling aspect of this investigation, hasn't it?" She rubbed her chin and stared into the void.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Nina waving, as she walked towards the exit of the crematorium. "Sorry, I have to leave early. Priya wants me to meet with the gardener about the shovel." Nina rolled her eyes and left.

Nina's words struck Nisha like a thunderbolt. She waved back at Nina before grabbing Cherian's arm.

"Ouch! What is it?" Cherian cried, nursing a bruise on the spot Nisha had gripped it.

"A shovel! Could the weapon have been a garden shovel?" Nisha asked, her eyes wide with excitement.

Cherian stared, her eyes widening as she thought hard. "Yeah, I guess so." She nodded speaking the words slowly and deliberately.

Nisha filled her in on what she had learned from Jyotsna about Nina being the last person to see Maithili alive and the short exchange between Nina and Priya about the shovel.

"So now we have three suspects I guess. Nina, Harish and Amit," Cherian raised a fist and straightened a finger as she said each name.

Nisha raised four fingers. "I think we should talk to Malika. She is a suspect too."

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's not ..." Cherian turned around distracted by an unusual sound. She spotted the source a few meters away near the parking lot. Harish was sitting on a bench in the shade of a *bael* tree tapping out sounds on a bulging metal disc.

"What's that?" Nisha was intrigued.

"A steel tongue drum," Harish replied. "I wanted to play May's favorite song here, so I brought it along."

"You're a business man and a musician?" Cherian snorted.

"Yes, that's why I understand the business I am in." Harish frowned, before he began playing his drum.

Nisha and Cherian were surprised by the melodious sounds emanating from the cold and metal surface. Soon Sunaina joined them under the tree to listen. Harish was now playing a sad tune that Nisha thought was vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it until Harish began to sing.

A sad song, but Nisha liked it. She didn't quite know the lyrics except for the chorus. So when Harish got there, she sang along.

*Bang bang, he shot me down*

*Bang bang, I hit the ground*

*Bang bang, that awful sound*

*Bang bang, my baby shot me down.*

"Shut up! Shut up!" Startled of their skins, Harish and Nisha both stopped singing and stared at Sunaina, who had a strained expression on her face. "Sorry, I'm sorry." She apologized, quickly recovering.

"It's okay, Sunaina. Come on. I'll walk you to Ruchi. She is with Ritu in the car." Nisha put her arm around the blushing woman, while Harish still gaped at them.

"I just miss her so much." Sunaina burst into tears as she massaged her temples.

"I understand," Nisha consoled. When they reached the car, Nisha told Ritu what had happened.

"Don't worry, Darling. Just get some sleep. I'll take care of Ruchi this afternoon and help you find someone trustworthy to do the cooking and cleaning." Ritu handed Ruchi over to Sunaina.

"I think the word baby in the song triggered her meltdown," Nisha whispered. Ritu nodded before getting into the driver's seat.

Once the car left the gates of the crematorium, Nisha returned to Cherian and Harish.

"What poem?" Harish demanded. "I want to see it."

Nisha frowned at Cherian, extracted the notebook from her handbag and gave it to Harish.

"Why didn't she tell me?" Harish fumed, after reading the poem. "We could have worked it out, if only she had told me. Now I have lost her and the baby I knew

nothing about. I couldn't protect either of them. I'm a failure."

"You mean, you were ready to be a father?" Nisha asked.

"No, but I was nonetheless, wasn't I?" He looked at Cherian.

She nodded and shrugged. The results of the DNA test had been messaged to her sometime ago.

"So I'd figure it out. I'd figure out a way to look after them."

"Wait, you're not angry with Maithili?" Nisha was surprised.

"I am, but not for what she did. I just wish she did not feel like she needed to hide it." Harish shook his head.  
"I mean the hints were there. May's obsession with the neighbor's baby makes sense, now. I'm so stupid."

"So if you knew, you'd get married?" Cherian taunted.

"God, no! You're so old fashioned." Harish rolled his eyes. "We lived in the same housing society. So we would continue our relationship, and I'd help out with the baby or something. I don't know. We'd talk about it."

A loud thud followed by a reverberating sound startled all three of them this time. Everyone stared in their direction wondering what had caused the air to vibrate so mournfully. When Harish had stood up to pace, he had forgotten the drum resting on his lap. Cherian picked it up, and people stopped staring. "That's a lot heavier than it looks," she complained causing Nisha to frown.

"What?" Cherian asked, but Nisha shook her head dismissively.

"*Bang, bang* was Maithili's favorite song?" Nisha asked.

Harish nodded while examining the instrument for dents and scratches.

"Did you ever play it for her on this instrument?" Nisha raised her eyebrows.

"Phew! No damage," Harish remarked. "No, I never got the chance. It arrived on Monday evening, and I was so excited. She would have really liked it, you know," he sighed. "I was practicing playing the song all Monday evening and Tuesday morning so I could surprise her, but ..." He snorted. "Of course, I know you don't believe me," he added glaring at Nisha and Cherian.

"Have you told your parents about your relationship, yet?" Cherian asked.

"No." Harish was firm. "I see no point in telling them now. Please, don't tell them. Please." Harish sat down and resumed playing morose tunes on the drum.

Nisha looked at her watch. It was 1:00 already. "I need to get back home. I have a student coming at 2:00," she told Cherian, starting to walk towards her car. Then she turned around. "Harry, do you have some music recordings of the people playing on that drum? I really like the sound of it, but I wouldn't know where to look."

"Sure, I can track down some solo instrumental pieces and send them to you." Harish smiled. "Well, you may not believe me, but at least you're cool." He gave her a thumbs up.

"I'll be done by 5:00, so we can go meet Malika at 5:30, perhaps?" Nisha asked, turning her attention back to Cherian.

"Sounds good. See you then." Cherian said walking Nisha to her car. "Wait!" she added just as Nisha started her car.

"What?" Nisha asked, rolling down her window.

"I think you were going to say something when I picked up Harish's drum. What was it?"

Nisha took a deep breath. "Well, just that, the drum could be the weapon, right?"

"Hmm. I guess, but it's so awkward and inefficient. And why would he have taken it to her house?"

"He was eager to show it to her, remember? Maybe, he went to see her, like I said before, but took the drum along. Perhaps, he wanted to point out that there was a lot they could do together and convince her that she did not need a child to be happy. But, in that moment, her being engrossed in work made him think she was a manipulative and selfish psychopath. And in a fit of rage he bashed her head with the drum."

"It's possible." Cherian did not sound too convinced. "That thing weighs a ton. I'll check out the footage in the elevator for that morning. But I don't know how useful that will be."

"Why shouldn't it be useful?"

"One of the four lift cameras wasn't working in Maithili's building. So it won't mean much if he doesn't show up in the rest. But if he does, then we have something. Anyway, combing through footage takes a lot of time. Besides, elevators in the building

are very busy in the morning and watching each of them carefully for two hours, is a painful task. Sometimes there are a lot of people in the elevator, and it's hard to identify them from the tops of their heads. The camera has some blind spots too, so then we have to deduce who the people standing there are, by watching where they get off. It's complicated."

"Yeah, that's tough" Nisha nodded. "I'll see you at 5:30." She rolled up her window.

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The topic was thermodynamics and Nayantara was a bright girl. But Nisha's heart wasn't in teaching today. Problems concerning heat sources and sinks kept driving her thoughts back to the electric oven that was turning Maithili's remains to ash, inevitably contributing to the ever increasing entropy of the universe in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics.

"I'm confused. Is this process adiabatic or isothermal?" Nayantara's words yanked Nisha back to the problems she could understand and tackle with confidence, thereby pushing the uncomfortable thoughts back to the dark recesses of her mind.

"That was a productive session. Six successfully solved problems in one class. You're certainly getting

the hang of this." Nisha was her ebullient self again, as she ushered Nayantara out of the door.

*And all done by 5:00, which gives me enough time to enjoy a relaxed cup of tea before Cherian arrives,* Nisha smiled to herself. Helping Nayantara understand the nuances of different physical processes and engines had cheered her up in a way only physics could.

Nisha had barely taken the first sip of tea when the doorbell rang. She looked at her watch. "Damn you Cherian for being fifteen whole minutes early and interrupting this blissful moment," she grumbled making her way to the door.

All prepared to berate Cherian, Nisha was taken aback by the unfamiliar figure facing her. "He... Hello, um.. do I know you?"

"You've never met me, but the name Malika may ring a bell?" The woman looked at Nisha expectantly.

"Malika," Nisha pressed her lips together and frowned. "Wait," Nisha's eyes lit up. "Are you the lawyer who wouldn't help Maithili?" she asked, when she realized why the name was so familiar.

Malika sighed as Nisha gestured for her to enter. "I'm not a monster. I just did not want my little boy

entangled with the broken legal system in our country." Malika said, making her way to the sofa.

"But you're a lawyer." Nisha pointed out.

"So of course, I know just how broken the system is, don't I? And exactly the kind of mess I'd be getting my son into." Malika glared, so Nisha shrugged.

"Fair enough. So why are you here then?" Nisha asked, making no attempt at offering refreshments, as she usually would with a guest.

"As a criminal lawyer, I have enough experience with the police to know that I must be a suspect. Since Priya arranged Maithili's funeral, I thought she might know the officer in charge of the case. She told me that you would be able to help me contact her."

Nisha took a deep breath. She was in no rush to respond. "Allow me to bring you a glass of water," Nisha said taking Malika by surprise. As Nisha walked towards the kitchen, she paused. "Did you kill Maithili?" she asked turning back to face Malika.

"How dare you ask me that?" Malika's eyes flashed.

"I did not invite you here, nor did I bring up the subject. You asked me to help you contact the police

officer in charge. So I want to know. Did you kill Maithili?"

"Of course, not. What good would her death do for me?" Malika retorted trying to regain her composure.

Nisha shrugged. She was on her way back from the kitchen with a glass of water, when the door bell rang again. Nisha knew Malika was hiding something, and that she was afraid. "I think the person you want to talk to is here." She opened the door. "Hello Cherian, look who is here," Nisha smiled pointing towards Malika.

"Good, just the person I need to see," Cherian took off her shoes and dashed off to the sofa. "What were you doing on the morning of Maithili's murder?"

"Me, I was at the gym. You can check with my trainer and the lady who was in charge of the sign in sheet there that morning."

"What time were you at the gym?"

"From 8:00 to 10:00."

"Your trainer was there with you for the entire period?"

"No, just till 9:00. After that, I did the treadmill for about an hour."

"I see. Did you leave the gym at any point during that two hour period?"

Nisha watched the exchange of words between the two women like a spectator at a riveting tennis match.

"Not that I recall." Malika shook her head.

"Then allow me to refresh your memory." Cherian sat down on the sofa next to Malika and played a video on the phone. Nisha handed Malika the glass of water and hunched over the phone to watch.

Nisha recognized the inside of the identical elevators she often took to Priya's house. "CCTV footage of the elevator." She nodded as Cherian moved the time slider a few minutes forward. She gasped when she saw Malika entering the elevator on the podium level, where the pool and clubhouse were situated. She was holding a kettlebell weight with a wide flat bottom by its handle. The gray scale image probably hid the redness of her cheeks, which must have accompanied the fierce scowl on her face. Nisha's eyes widened when she saw Malika exiting the elevator on the twentieth floor. "That's where ..." She stopped to look at Cherian.

"Yes, it's from the morning of Maithili's murder." Cherian nodded. "That's the floor on which Maithili's apartment is, and the time stamp shows 9:38 am." She turned to Malika who was white as a sheet. "So you don't recall any of this?" Cherian raised her eyebrows.

Malika bit her lips. "Okay, please let me explain." Cherian waited, but said nothing, so Malika took a sip of water and continued. "I had just seen a message from Maithili begging me to ask my son to tell the police what he saw. I was so mad at her. How could she want to get a little boy entangled with the police? No offense, but I know just how messed up things can get with the police and how long drawn any court case can be. I was about to come over and give the inconsiderate woman a piece of my mind."

"And ..." Nisha prompted.

"Well, I was so upset, I hadn't realized I was carrying the weight. As the elevator reached Maithili's floor, I began to calm down, and while exiting the lift, I noticed the weight for the first time. I felt really stupid carrying it, and then for coming to yell at a woman who was desperate enough to ask a child for his help. The weight was heavy; 10 Kgs, so I slumped down on the floor against the wall to rest for a few minutes and then went back to the gym. I swear to god this is true.

You can even check the elevator footage, and you'll see me returning."

Cherian looked at Nisha, who knew they were thinking the same thing. "Yes Madam, indeed the footage shows you returning by another elevator eight minutes later," was Cherian's guarded response.

"So I am not a suspect." Malika sighed with relief. She looked at Cherian awaiting confirmation.

"I guess that would depend on what happened in those eight minutes," was Nisha's automatic response, but Cherian kept mum.

Malika stared at them both, then turned around and left without another word.

Cherian turned to Nisha and threw up her hands in exasperation. "Why would you tell her that? Now you've put her on her guard. She's a lawyer. It's going to be impossible to deal with her."

"Sorry, sorry, so stupid of me. Do you think it was her?" Nisha bit her lips, regretting her mistake.

"She was there at the right time with a suitable weapon. So ..." Cherian shrugged.

"So was Nina," Nisha pointed out.

"I haven't found Harry Potter in the elevator footage yet, so nothing definitive there."

"Because one lift camera wasn't working, so he could have been on it?" Nisha asked. Cherian nodded in response, and Nisha sunk into a thoughtful silence.

"Since Harish stays on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of the neighboring wing, he would first take an elevator down to the podium level in his own wing. The wings are only connected at the podium and parking levels, right?"

"Yes. So you think I should check the elevator footage for those two hours in Harish's wing. What a fun job." Cherian rolled her eyes.

"Being a detective is not always fun. It involves hard work too." Nisha laughed.

"It seems like it is always fun for you, and always hard work for me," Cherian grumbled.

"There, there, now. Surely, you can delegate," Nisha patted Cherian on her shoulder. "By the way, you never told me if Amit had an alibi. What was he doing at the time of the murder?"

"He was out playing cricket for about an hour between 8:00 and 9:00, and then he was sitting with the *pundit*, his brother and his father performing a *puja* for his

grandmother in front of several guests, until they all left together for the funeral," Cherian replied. "The *pundit*, his assistant, many friends and family members, both close and distant vouch for his presence among them for the entire interval between 9:00 and 10:00."

"And who was he playing cricket with?"

"By himself. He was practicing in the nets. He went there to calm himself down before his grandma's funeral." Cherian mumbled, not meeting Nisha's eyes.

"What?" Nisha was stunned. "He has no alibi, and he admits to have had a cricket bat with him at the time? And what does he mean by playing cricket by himself? That's not even possible. It takes two to tango, and at least two, to play cricket. Haven't you ever watched the game? Good heavens Cherian, how clueless are you?"

"Of course, I have." Cherian whined. "I asked him about it. But he said that the society has one of those ball machines. He told me he checked it out from the clubhouse and used it in the nets to vent his frustration. I checked the clubhouse records and they show him having checked out the machine at 7:55. I even looked at the CCTV footage from the clubhouse. It showed him signing the register at the reception desk and then exiting the clubhouse with the ball

machine at 8:00. He returned the ball machine a few minutes before 9:00 as per CCTV footage."

"Still, as he pounded the balls, he could have become angrier, left the machine in the nets, murdered Maithili and then returned to resume pounding balls," Nisha pointed out. "How long have you known, and why didn't you tell me?"

"Amit told me, when I interviewed him on the day of the murder." Cherian finally looked Nisha in the eye, only to be met with a piercing glare.

"I'm sorry I kept it from you, but I didn't think you'd help me if I told you then. Would you have?" She looked questioningly at Nisha.

Nisha glared at her some more before taking a deep breath. "Probably not," was her curt response.

"But look how much we have found out. We have not one, but four likely suspects." Cherian indicated waving four protruding fingers of her left hand.

"Malika with the free weight, Nina with the shovel, Harish with the drum and Amit with the cricket bat," she said checking each of the four against a finger.

Nisha burst out laughing.

## Minor Progress

Cherian stared at her perplexed. "What? Are you losing it? I'm sorry, okay. I just wanted your help, and you know, I felt stupid asking for it." Cherian blushed. "I know all evidence pointed to Amit, but that's not the case anymore. Will you just stop laughing?" Cherian exploded.

Nisha struggled to contain her mirth. "It's just the way you put it. Malika with the free weight, etc. It sounded like a game of *Clue*."

"Game of *Clue*?" Cherian furrowed her eyebrows.

"You don't know what that is?" Nisha asked in disbelief.

"Not a clue," Cherian laughed.

"It's a board game, Cherian. What kind of detective hasn't heard of *Clue*?"

Cherian shrugged. Nisha rolled her eyes. "Anyway, so you're going to check the elevator footage for Harish. Nina, we know was there, probably with the shovel. Actually, you could probably check the elevator footage to confirm that too. I'm not sure what to make

of Malika. And Amit, well, I have no idea why you think he is innocent. I mean he admits to being agitated, and it was just a few hours before his grandma's funeral which was the day before her hundredth birthday. Armed with a cricket bat, he was venting a cocktail of emotions, so why not him?"

"We can't eliminate him, yet. But I just don't think it was him. So can we return to him later, if the rest all fizzle out?"

"Okay sure," Nisha grudgingly agreed. "I see you're giving me a dose of my own medicine."

"And I must say, it's quite satisfying." Cherian got up to leave.

"Fine, you focus on Harry Potter and I'll see what I can find out about Nina and the shovel from Priya." Nisha walked Cherian to her door. "By the way, what time does the medical examiner (ME) estimate as the time of death?" Nisha asked, as Cherian slipped into her shoes.

"She confirmed what Jyotsna said, that it was between 8:00 and 10:00, but she thinks it was closer to 8:00."

"That's weird, since Nina saw her alive and working at 9:00." Nisha remarked.

"I was wondering about that too." The two of them pondered in silence for a few seconds.

"She gives a two hour window for a reason, right?" Nisha asked.

"Yeah, but in my experience, this ME is usually quite accurate." Cherian frowned.

"That makes Amit an even more likely suspect. His alibi is weak in the most likely time period." Nisha pointed out. Seeing Cherian grimace, she changed the subject. "Perhaps, Abhay could talk to the ME and shed some light on the matter," she suggested.

Cherian nodded, waved goodbye and closed the door behind her.

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Nisha knew the sun would set in a little over an hour. That's when she expected Raj back home. So when Priya had suggested that they discuss Nina over an evening walk, Nisha was thrilled. She watched the pale blue eastern sky magically transform into a riot of pink, orange and blue hues as the sun approached the western horizon. She recalled the expression for Rayleigh scattering. The magic of Physics, she thought, was its ability to capture the essence of natural beauty in simple, elegant expressions. Mumbai

had few green spots left, and the podium level of this apartment complex had an amazing view. She had been trying to convince Raj to move, but he considered it too much of a hassle. As Nisha looked around, her eyes wandered back to the spot where Maithili had collided with the old woman. One unlikely chance happening had triggered a chain of events with far reaching effects.

"Hello. Earth calling Nisha," Priya repeated a couple of times, before Nisha snapped out of her reverie.

"You're unexpectedly chipper?" Nisha observed, as they began their evening walk. "I mean you've just attended two funerals in three days, one of which you had to organize."

"I know! Reminds you that life is short. So nothing's more important than staying healthy and happy, right?"

"Right!" Nisha smiled. "You know, you're absolutely right."

"No! Wrong. Staying safe is more important," Priya hissed. "These people did no die of depression or ill-health. One had an accident and the other was murdered, Nisha. Now tell me, do you think Nina killed Maithili? Cause if we have a murderer in this building, we have to find them and lock them away, or

they'll kill again. It happens in every Agatha Christie story. At least three deaths occur, before the murderer is found."

"Priya!" Nisha chided. "You're not chipper, you're positively high strung. Calm down and get it together. Life is not an Agatha Christie novel. But I do intend to find out who killed my friend. You seemed fine this morning, so what happened to you?"

"That was before I heard Nina lying about the shovel," Priya whispered.

"What are you talking about?" Nisha asked, "And why are you whispering?"

"Because, I don't want Nina to know what I think. Nina has been distracted ever since the morning Maithili was murdered, but I did not give it much thought until we talked about the shovel this morning. She told me she had dropped it off in the storage room at 8:00, just as she had promised. So I chided Sunil for not giving it to the gardener."

"Who is Sunil?" Nisha asked trying to make sense of Priya's rant.

"Sunil is the housing society's night manager. His shift ends at 9:00 in the morning. The gardener comes in at 8:30. Sunil was supposed to pick up the shovel from

the storage room and give it to the gardener. He said that he had checked at 8:30 and then again at 9:00, but did not find the shovel in there. So Sunil had left a message with the Prakash who took over from him at 9:00. Prakash too confirms that the shovel was not there at 9:00, but when he checked again at 10:00, it was there. By then, the gardener started on some other job, and all this led to some misunderstandings and complications that Nina and I had to sort out after the funeral."

"Priya!" Nisha gripped her shoulders. "I'm sure you found it frustrating, but why are you telling me all this in excruciating detail?"

"Because, Nina has been acting strange, and then she insists she put the shovel in the storage room at 8:00, but she actually didn't until she finished her morning rounds. Don't you get it? Initially, I thought Sunil may have forgotten to take the shovel to the gardener and was lying, but then Prakash confirmed his story. So Nina must be the one lying." Priya looked significantly at Nisha.

"I see," Nisha's eyes widened. "She forgot to put the shovel in the storage room before her rounds, but there was no need for her to lie, unless she wanted to establish that she did not have the shovel with her during her rounds. The thing is, if she got really mad

when she saw the garbage outside and happened to have a shovel in her hand ..." Nisha left the sentence hanging.

"Exactly!" Priya nodded. "If she thinks I suspect her, she'll come after me. It gets easier after the first time, doesn't it? I'm scared."

"Priya, please, get a grip. There must be some other explanation. Irritated as Nina must have been, do you really think it's likely that she killed Maithili over a bag of garbage?"

"There is something else about Nina," Priya whispered. "She hates artists."

"What? Why?" Nisha was astonished. She knew of deep rooted social, religious and caste based prejudices, some of which she had to combat in previous cases, but artists? This was unexpected.

"Nina was married to an artist, Vinod for a long time. She believed his work was good, but he couldn't catch a break. Nina on the other hand, was very successful in the advertising industry. She climbed up the corporate hierarchy with ease. She earned a lot and they chose not to have children, so she was comfortably able to support Vinod's passion. At one of her corporate parties, she introduced Vinod to the wife of a colleague. The woman owned an art gallery and

was impressed by his work. With her backing, his work was noticed, and eventually Vinod became successful. Then he ditched Nina for another artist. She was devastated."

"Ouch! Wow, that's stone cold. So then what happened?"

"A divorce followed. Though it broke her heart, financially she did not lose anything. Vinod was earning plenty through his art by then, so she did not have to pay any alimony. He agreed to her keeping all their existing assets."

"Well that's something, at least"

"I don't know the details, but over time, she became depressed. I mean, she had done so much for him, and he was her only emotional support. She had no kids and no friends. She couldn't bear the reminders of what she had assumed to be a happy married life. So she sold her apartment and moved here."

"How do you know all this?"

"When she posted the video of Maithili screaming at her, I went to see her. I told her it wasn't appropriate for a committee member to post such videos on the society group, and that she should have brought her concerns directly to the committee. She apologized,

and agreed I was right. She explained that she had over-reacted because Maithili was in her art studio, and it just made her extra mad. I was puzzled, so she told me her story." Priya stopped to catch her breath before adding, "Also, she clearly did not like Maithili. So why go out of her way to help arrange her funeral, if not out of guilt?"

"ou have a point," Nisha nodded. "But wait," she shook her head trying to keep things straight. "Back up a bit. If Nina still works in a demanding corporate job, how does she have so much time for the society?"

"No, the advertising company shut down a couple of years ago. She had invested well and gets plenty from dividends. She also got a decent job at some sustainable waste management company. In fact, she had consultants from her company help our society set up efficient composting and trash compacting systems at a discounted price. Supervising trash collection here is a part of her job with her company. And her help has been a godsend in these days, that the municipal corporation is breathing down the necks of large housing societies to do efficient waste management."

"Hmm, this does drive her up to the top of the suspect list. I must tell Cherian. By the way, if you're still worried about being home alone, while Abhay is at work, why don't you have your nephew Sanjay come

and spend a few days with you?" Nisha had first heard of Sanjay when she had solved her first case involving a theft in Priya's house. She knew Sanjay to be quiet and responsible. Just the kind of calming presence Priya needed to steady her nerves.

"That's a good idea," Priya cheered up. "Sanjay just finished his midterm exams a couple of days ago. He'll enjoy a break of watching TV and eating home cooked food."

Priya and Nisha discussed various snack recipes as they walked around the society. "Sanjay loves my freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. It won't take much to tempt him." Priya smiled.

"If you're making those, please send me some too." Nisha's pitiful expression made Priya laugh.

"I'll think about it." She giggled as they parted ways.

Nisha looked at her watch. The sun was low on the horizon bathing the whole society in a gentle orange glow. She decided she had time for another quick lap around the swimming pool and football field before she had to get home. As she meandered to avoid the line of coconut trees and a few people walking in the opposite direction, she heard a strange sound. Initially, she ignored it, but she stopped in her tracks as it became louder. "Psst!" There was no mistaking it this

time. She turned looking for the source of the sound, when she saw a little girl in a balcony one floor above the podium level waving wildly at her. Having got her attention, the little girl gestured for her to wait.

Moments later, the girl was in front of her panting. "I ran down the stairs," she explained, gasping to catch her breath.

Nisha nodded and waited for her to speak.

"I'm Monisha. My great grandma died a few days ago."

"I'm so sorry, Monisha." Nisha wondered why she had approached her. She waited for her to continue, but Monisha only fidgeted with her plaits and said nothing.

"Monisha, is there something you want to tell me about your great grandma?" Nisha asked.

Monisha shook her head. "It was nice meeting you, Monisha, but I need to go home for dinner." Nisha smiled and walked on.

"Wait!" Monisha blurted out. Nisha turned. "Are you Police Aunty's friend?" Monisha asked. "I've seen you with her."

"You mean Cherian?" Nisha suppressed a smile. She wondered if anyone had called her Police Aunty before. "When did you see us?" Nisha was surprised. She did not recall ever seeing the girl before.

"There are no toys here. So I spend most of my time looking out of the balcony. I saw you talking to her on that bench."

"I see. Yes, you're right. I do know Cherian. But why do you ask?"

"I wanted to talk to you about my uncle, Amit. You see, I know he is a suspect in the murder case. But I also know he did not do it. You see, he has an alibi."

"He does?" Nisha raised her eyebrows. "How old are you anyway? Eight?"

"I'm ten." Monisha sounded indignant. "And I've read enough Enid Blyton mystery stories to know exactly what an alibi is."

"Sorry, my bad. I underestimated you. So you say your uncle has an alibi. Who is it?"

"Me, of course."

"He has already admitted that he was playing cricket by himself. So you were not with him. Then how can

you be his alibi?"

"I never said I was with him. But I was in the balcony from which I called out to you. And as you can see, I had a very clear view of the practice nets at the edge of the football field. A minute after he left the house, Amit Uncle went towards the clubhouse. Then a few minutes later, I saw him come out of the clubhouse with the ball machine. After that, he was in the nets, practicing quite aggressively. He even banged the bat on the ground several times. He was there for about an hour while Pundit Uncle went through some rituals with Dadaji. Amit Uncle then went to the clubhouse to return the ball machine. A few minutes he exited the clubhouse. Then, I saw him walking towards the building entrance, so I went to open the front door, and he was there the within a minute of me opening the door. I bet you can even check elevator footage, that will show you he came straight to this floor, and then after that, he was with the whole family until after the funeral."

"Are you sure he never left the nets for a short while?"

"Positive. Not until he took the ball machine back to the clubhouse."

"Were you actually there all the time? Didn't you need to go to the bathroom or get a snack?"

"No, I was in the balcony the whole time, because this was my first time attending a funeral and the smell of *agarbatti* and all the rituals made me uncomfortable. After Amit Uncle came back, he started doing the *puja* with the Pundit Uncle, Papa and Dadaji. So again, I returned to the balcony and waited there till Mama called me when it was time to leave for the crematorium."

"Then why did you rush back in when you saw your uncle leave the field?"

"I knew he was upset from the way he was banging his bat and whacking the ball. So I just wanted to make sure he was okay and give him a hug."

Nisha nodded. "Thank you for telling me this. But I have one more question for you."

"What?" Monisha asked, looking apprehensive.

"Did you notice anyone else outside, while your uncle was playing in the nets?"

"He was playing by himself. I told you." Monisha looked puzzled.

"Yes, but did you see anyone else nearby? Like a person cleaning the pool, or a security guard?"

Monisha scrunched up her face, deep in thought. "No guards or anyone cleaning the pool, but there was a man trimming the bushes." Monisha pointed to the hedges on the side of the walkway opposite the nets. "I remember, because I always feel bad seeing plants being cut. I feel like it must hurt them."

"You're possibly correct." Nisha told her. "I read an article about a study that found that when plants are cut, they make sounds that are equivalent of screaming. The only reason we don't hear them, is that the frequencies are well outside the human hearing range."

"Goodness, that's just horrible," Monisha squeaked.

"It may not be as bad as it sounds. The scientists don't fully understand what the sounds mean. Plants are nothing like us, and sometimes the sick parts need to be cut, just like we might need medicine or surgery. They don't seem very nice, but they help us get better." Nisha comforted.

"That's true," Monisha nodded. "He was making quite a mess too," Monisha remarked.

"What? Who was making a mess?" Nisha blinked.

"The person trimming the bushes. I wondered how long the walkway would be messy, but then I saw a

lady was following him at some distance, collecting the fallen leaves and branches in a jute sack."

"Were they there for the entire hour too?" Nisha asked.

"I think the man cutting hedges was there before Amit uncle started playing in the nets. The lady came by a little later. After they finished cutting the hedges and clearing up, they moved to the field outside the nets and started cutting the grass. I think they were still there when Amit Uncle left. Yes, I remember seeing them when I returned to the balcony."

"Then what did you do in the balcony, while your uncle did *puja*?"

I was bored for a few minutes, but then I saw Shaheen who lives next door. She had come to the field with her capoeira teacher. She's so graceful. I love watching her do cartwheels. That time she even managed the head stand without any support. So cool!"

"A head stand! Wow that's amazing!"

"I know, right? I wish I could do it too," Monisha sighed.

"Yeah, me too," Nisha nodded. "I never could, and now I am too old," she lamented. "Anyway, this has

been very helpful, Monisha. Thank you." Nisha smiled. "You are very observant. I'm sure you can solve mysteries just as well as little Bets from the *Five Find-Outers*. She was the nicest and most observant of them all, I think."

"Thank you, she is my favorite character from the series." Monisha beamed. "You will tell Police Aunty, won't you?" she looked up with her big innocent eyes. "Amit Uncle gets angry and says scary things, but he would never actually hurt anyone."

Nisha smiled. "You know, I think Police Aunty agrees with you, but I will tell her what you said."

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After dinner Nisha told Raj all about her day. "Wow! A lot happened today! And you seem to have made decent progress, Nish." He looked at his watch. "Let's get to bed. It's quite late."

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired." Nisha agreed.

"So is Nina the most likely suspect now?" Raj asked taking off the bedspread.

"Priya seems to think so, and if Monisha is to be believed, Amit is not guilty." Nisha replied putting her phone to charge.

"Seems like Cherian was right about him." Raj suppressed a smile.

Nisha ignored his comment. "What do you think of the drum as a weapon?" Nisha asked, as they got into bed.

"A little out there, but not impossible, especially in the heat of the moment. Your theory with Harish holds together, but seems unlikely." Raj sounded skeptical.

"I can't get a good read on Harish. I mean, he seems to have these two very different sides to his personality, you know. The shrewd businessman and the sensitive artist." Nisha bit her lips. "You know, like ..." Nisha shook her head and waved her hands, searching for the right words.

"Sort of like, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, you mean?" Raj raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, and it was fine when he kept his two worlds separate. His personal life and his business, I mean. I think he was good at compartmentalizing. But being tricked into being a father, that would really muddle up the compartments in his mind, wouldn't it? Being manipulated by the woman he genuinely loved. That's got to be brutal. Wouldn't his shrewd side kick in, and yet it would not be tempered by cool his business acumen, but egged on by untamed passion. And then

who knows how he would react, perhaps not even him."

"When you put it that way, I don't know." Raj shrugged. "Did Cherian get back to you about the footage from the elevator in Harish's wing?"

Let me check again. Nisha turned on her phone and scrolled through her messages. "Ritu wants to meet for lunch tomorrow," she mumbled. "Ah, here it is. No, she hasn't got the footage yet." Nisha frowned as she read on. "Apparently, all elevator footage files from that day were deleted from the society's servers this evening." Nisha stared.

"What? How did that happen?" Raj asked.

"No idea," Nisha shook her head, "but my guess would be, that someone was trying to hide something. Nina is on the managing committee, and she would have access." Nisha looked at Raj. "Let's see what Cherian finds out tomorrow."

"Ooh, the plot thickens," Raj waggled his eyebrows. "By the way, did you say something about Ritu? It's been a while since you last saw her, right?"

"Yes, I know. We've all had busy schedules and stopped meeting on Fridays. But I forgot to mention that I saw her today at Maithili's funeral."

"Maithili's funeral?" Raj repeated, confused. "What was she doing there?"

"She's working with an NGO to help single moms deal with stress. Sachi contacted her to help Maithili's neighbor Sunaina. Since she is coming here tomorrow morning to help Sunaina, she asked if we could meet over lunch."

"Nice. Where are you planning to go?"

"I invited her over here. It's the most comfortable place to chat. And Reshma makes awesome Goan fish curry. That's Ritu's favorite."

"Yummy, so I get a good dinner too. I think you should invite your friends for lunch more often." Raj winked.

Nisha made a face at him. She was about to retort, when her phone buzzed. She was distracted when she noticed the message was from Rohan. *I was at Asif's house today when Harish came by. He asked me if I could pass on a pen drive to you. He said it had what you asked for. Can I drop it off tomorrow?,* she read.

*Sure, does 10:30 work for you?,* Nisha messaged back.

*I'll be there, Lady, but I won't do math.*

Nisha laughed. *Fine Grasshopper, you can have some of my home made chocolate cake, for your efforts.*

"Oh goody!" Raj clapped his hands in glee. "Now there is going to be chocolate cake too." He had been peering to read Nisha's messages. "This is awesome. Make sure you squirrel away a slice for me. Young boys have enormous appetites." He yawned.

Nisha rolled her eyes and smiled. "I am strict about your diet for your own good you know," she grumbled. But when she heard Raj snore, she gave up and switched off the lights.

## **Deleted!**

"I smell chocolate cake," Rohan observed, his mouth starting to water. "And fish," he added, wrinkling his nose.

"Well, I did promise cake. The fish isn't for you and stop sniffing my house." Nisha grumbled. "Now, where is it?" Nisha asked, leading him to the sofa.

"Oh right!" Rohan patted his pockets. "Here." He handed her a pen drive.

"So what's in it, Lady? He's not trying to romance you now, is he?" Rohan winked. "I mean, we know he has a thing for older women."

"Oh really?" Nisha's icy tone sent a shiver down Rohan's spine. "And exactly how old do you think I am?"

"Oh, no, Lady, I didn't mean, I mean, ..." Rohan blushed, as he babbled.

Nisha burst out laughing. "It's okay. I'm old, I know it and frankly, I like it. But I can see you're curious, and now too scared to ask again , so I'll tell you. I had asked Harish to download some music for me. I heard

him play the steel tongue drum at Maithili's funeral, and not only did I enjoy the music, but I was also intrigued by the physics of it. The sounds it produced were very different from what I had expected. So I asked him, if he would download some songs played on the particular instrument for me."

"Oh, I see." Rohan was relieved. "You're a lot cooler than you seem, Lady. From skates to drums to murders, you explore anything and everything that piques your curiosity. That's totally rad."

"Oh you'll say anything to get some chocolate cake, won't you?" Nisha blushed. "Reshma, can you get the chocolate cake?" Nisha called out.

Reshma waltzed in with a plate full of fluffy moist slices of chocolate cake. "My recipe uses a lot of cocoa," Nisha remarked drinking in the chocolatey aroma. "Personally, I like it a little bitter."

"So what's the latest development on the case, Lady?" Rohan asked, after thanking Reshma. "OMG this is just too good!" Rohan blurted out after his first bite of cake. "Such a strong chocolate flavor. I love it." He smacked his lips and stretched out for more. "Is Cherian wrong again? Can you prove Amit did it?"

"It turns out Cherian was right," Nisha grimaced.

"Ouch, Lady, that must have hurt," Rohan laughed.  
"Talk about bitter."

Nisha watched with fascination as Rohan devoured the pieces of chocolate cake, while she told him about Amit's alibi. "Can't you slow down? You'll either choke or vomit." Nisha cautioned, unable to restrain herself.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I can eat a lot." Rohan assured her, as soon as he swallowed. "That ball machine is so cool! I wish I lived in that society." Rohan brooded. "Asif has been bragging about it. I can't wait to try it out. We're practicing in the nets tomorrow afternoon." He cheered up.

"Looks like you found a replacement for skating," Nisha sighed.

"The novelty will wear out, though to be frank, skating was becoming boring too. It's too small a space for any tricks." Rohan grumbled. "Thank you, Reshma," he added, taking the glass of chilled milk she had brought for him. "So who is your prime suspect now?" he asked turning back to Nisha.

"I think it's Harish. He is pretty shrewd guy when it comes to business, and he would not take kindly to being manipulated."

"Manipulated? What do you mean?" Rohan asked chugging down the milk.

Nisha told him about Maithili's poem and pregnancy and her theory. "Murder by musical instrument? Lady, that's epic! So are there any other contenders?" Rohan put the empty milk glass down on the coffee table and fished out a hanky from his pocket to wipe his mouth.

"Priya is convinced it's Nina. She is so worried she will be murdered next, that she has invited Sanjay to stay with her while Abhay is at work," Nisha rolled her eyes.

"Oh cool. I'll drop in to say hello. I haven't seen Sanjay in a while." Rohan paused and frowned. "Wait, even if she does believe Nina Aunty to be the murderer, why would she consider herself to be a target?" Rohan blinked, putting the hanky back in his pocket.

"Because Priya was the one who discovered Nina had been lying about carrying a shovel, when she called on Maithili on the morning of her murder."

"Ooh, intrigue." Rohan rubbed his hands and waggled his eyebrows. "That lady has quite a temper from what I hear."

"Yes, and now somehow the elevator footage of the day of the murder has been wiped out. As a committee member, she would have access to that. Then of course, there is Malika. If Nina actually saw Maithili alive and left her that way, then Malika could have murdered her."

"The mother of the cyclist you mean? Yes, I heard she was very angry with Maithili and threatened to sue her or something. But is there any evidence against her?"

Nisha told Rohan about the elevator footage Cherian had discovered.

"Wow!" Rohan took a deep breath and processed what he had learned. "So one down, three left." He observed. "This is getting exciting." He rubbed his hands together.

"Murder is not exciting, Grasshopper," Nisha chided.

"You could have fooled me," Rohan laughed.

"I think it's time for you to go." Nisha stood up.

"Jeez Lady, you sure know how to make a guy feel welcome." He continued to laugh as he walked to the door.

"Grasshopper," Nisha called out. "Thanks for this," she waved the pen-drive.

"Sure." He gave her a thumbs up. "Totally worth the chocolate cake and update," he winked as he got into the elevator.

Nisha shook her head and closed the door. She went to check on the fish Reshma had prepared for lunch.

"Ritu likes it spicy, Reshma," she said adding a pinch of red chilli powder. Just then the doorbell rang. Nisha looked helplessly at Reshma, waving her hand laced with chilli powder.

"I'll get it," Reshma offered. Nisha nodded her thanks. As she washed up, Reshma escorted the visitor in.

"Reshma will you ever forgive me?" Nisha heard Cherian ask, as she walked into the living room.

Her curiosity piqued, Nisha looked at Reshma. "I think you are a lot nicer now. Not many people have the courage to change the way you have, and too few would even bother to ask my forgiveness, so I think I will." Reshma smiled.

"Thank you, Reshma. It means a lot to me." Cherian bit her lips. "Also, I have something for you," she added.

Nisha and Reshma looked at each other in confusion. Cherian stuck her hand into her uniform pocket and pulled out a visiting card. She handed it to Reshma. "It has my personal cell phone number as well. If ever you, or anyone you deeply care about, are in trouble with the police, just give me a call, and I will help you out as best I can within the constraints of the law."

Tears streamed down Reshma's cheeks. "Thank you so much. I don't think you know what this means to some one like me," Reshma blubbered.

"I think I do." Cherian nodded. "Please use it well."

Nisha couldn't help herself. She grabbed them both and pulled them into a tight hug.

"Okay, I need air," Cherian protested squirming out, though she couldn't suppress a grin. "I came here because of your text. You said you found out a lot of things, and it was too much to text."

"Yes, and I hate texting." Nisha frowned. She filled Cherian in on what Priya had told her about Nina.

"Yeah well, I wouldn't exactly trust Priya Desai, right now!" Cherian snapped.

"What? Cherian! What are you talking about?" Nisha was bewildered.

"She is the one who deleted the elevator video footage from the day of the murder." Cherian hissed. "So we have a new suspect."

"Wait, you don't actually suspect Priya, do you?" Nisha was incredulous.

"I tried to retrieve the footage, but it wasn't possible. It had been permanently deleted with no backup. The authorization to delete came from Priya Desai's account."

"That makes absolutely no sense. Let's go talk to her," Nisha suggested, as she shot out a message to Priya. "Reshma, make sure the rice is ready before you leave. Ritu will be coming around 12:30. Keep some *nimbu paani* in the fridge too. Cherian and I have to go to Priya's house, now." Nisha called out.

"It seems like your gut was right about Amit," she said, as she slipped on her shoes.

"It was?" Cherian smiled. Then she raised her eyebrows waiting for Nisha to continue.

"I think so. I don't know how well his alibi will hold up, but I trust her." Nisha locked the door as Cherian called the elevator.

"Why wouldn't his alibi hold up? Who is it?" Cherian asked, stepping into the lift.

"His ten-year-old niece." Nisha described her encounter with Monisha the previous night. "I trust children in these matters. She would not have come to me if it wasn't true."

"Not even to save her uncle, who she clearly loves?" Cherian sounded skeptical as she exited the elevator. "I mean, she seems to know that her uncle is in serious trouble. Kids make up stories all the time and even start to believe them. So why not her?"

"I know, and she might cook up such a story if questioned, but to seek me out, seems very proactive. Also, it did not seem like she was lying. I mean her story was simple. Kids tend to overdo it, don't they?" Nisha pressed the doorbell.

"So what is her story?" Cherian asked, as Sanjay opened the door.

"Hello Sanjay," Nisha smiled. "We're here to see your aunt."

"Of course, please come in, sit." Sanjay gestured towards the sofa. "I'll go get her."

Nisha told Cherian everything Monisha had told her about her uncle. "You can verify Monisha's story with the two gardeners the society had on duty next to the nets that day," Nisha added. "I think Monisha's story will check out."

"Gardeners?" Cherian raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, a man trimming the hedges, and a woman collecting the fallen leaves and branches." Nisha went on to explain that she had asked Monisha, if she had seen anyone besides her uncle near the field.

"Why didn't Amit say anything about the gardeners, when I asked him for an alibi?" Cherian grumbled. "Stupid people. I don't know why we take so much trouble on their behalf, when they can't even be bothered for themselves."

"Amit may have been too upset at the time to have noticed them," Nisha reasoned.

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, this is definitely useful." Cherian nodded. "How did you manage to get so much out of a little girl?" she asked, sounding impressed.

"Children like to talk to adults who take them seriously," Nisha smiled as they waited on the sofa for Priya. "I miss my kids. They grow up so fast."

"You must have been a good mother. I saw you with Ruchi." Cherian remarked, just as Priya walked in.

"Hi," Priya smiled. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I was in the middle of an online transaction, and I had to complete the payment procedure. So what's up?" she asked, disconcerted by Cherian's grim expression.

"Why have you deleted the CCTV footage from the day of Maithili's murder?" Cherian blurted out, angered by Priya's casual attitude.

"What?" Priya barked. "I have done no such thing. How dare you accuse me like that?"

"I can," Cherian stood up to face Priya. "Because I have proof. Who are you trying to protect?" Cherian snarled. "Nisha told me you tried to divert suspicion towards Nina."

"Proof? What do you mean?" How can that be since I did not do it?" Priya was baffled. "And I wasn't trying to divert suspicion." Priya fumed. "You're crazy. I was only trying to help. Nisha, is this one of your stupid mind games?" She glared at Nisha.

"No, of course, ..." Nisha began to say.

"Leave her out of this," Cherian interrupted. "The deleting of the footage on the society server was

authorized from your account."

"What?" Priya froze. Her eyes widened. "Wait, when this happen?"

"Sometime yesterday evening." Cherian glared at Priya. "As if you did not know. You did it."

Priya sat down, abruptly, supporting her head with her palm. "I am sorry," she mumbled. "I completely forgot."

"Forgot?" Nisha stared at her in astonishment. "Priya, what are you talking about? What did you do?"

"A week ago we had some problems with the society servers. Several were not working properly. So they were supposed to be replaced this week. The server company asked us to temporarily reduce our CCTV storage starting on Thursday. It was only for a few days. The server was set to auto-delete at 6:00 pm every evening, retaining only the most recent 48 hours of footage. So on Thursday evening at 6:00, all footage before Tuesday 6:00 pm would be deleted. The technical support person from the server company helped me implement this about a week ago, but I had to authorize it from my account. I swear this is true. You can check this with the server company."

Cherian collapsed on the sofa. "Why didn't you tell us this, so we could copy the footage before it was deleted?"

"I am so sorry. I just completely forgot." Priya looked miserable/.

"That's enough Cherian. You know Priya's had her hands full with arranging funerals. It was a genuine slip up. You shouldn't be so mean to her." Nisha chided.

"Yeah," Cherian sighed. "Sorry, I snapped at you, but this makes our investigation a lot harder." Cherian could not mask her disappointment. "Thankfully, I had downloaded the elevator footage of Malika onto my phone, so at least we have that. But I still needed to check on Harish and Nina." Cherian sulked.

Cherian and Priya turned to look at Nisha, but she seemed to be lost in thought. "What is it Nisha?" Priya ventured.

"Priya, who else knew that the CCTV footage would soon be deleted?" Nisha asked.

"What do you mean?" Priya was confused by Nisha's sudden change of course.

"I mean, were all the residents informed?" Nisha clarified.

"No. It was only for a few days, and even so, CCTV footage would be there for forty eight hours, so no, we did not inform the residents. Only committee members knew."

"And that includes Nina?" Cherian asked.

"Yes, of course." Priya nodded.

"She just needed to stall us with a story so we would not search for her in CCTV footage immediately. She admitted to being there, so we did not look for her, but she did not admit to having a shovel, knowing that in forty eight hours there would be no proof of it." Nisha sighed.

"This is messy. I wasn't able to eliminate Harish, but Nina does seem the to be the most likely suspect," Cherian speculated. "Especially as she told Priya she hates artists. Also, if supervising garbage collection was a part of her job, Maithili's defiance must have really annoyed her. "

"But if the ME is correct, then Harish is more likely, right? He could have come at anytime, perhaps when Jyotsna was bathing." Nisha pointed out. "Priya can

you ask Abhay to talk to the ME? He'll understand the technicalities."

"Sure, I'll ask him to find out right away." Priya sent her husband a text message.

"What does it matter what the ME says? Nina has admitted to seeing Maithili alive at 9:00. I mean why would she lie about that, if Maithili were already dead?" Cherian objected, and Nisha frowned.

"But if Nina did actually see Maithili working, then I guess it would have to be either Nina, Harish or Malika. Malika's going to be one tough nut to crack. As a criminal lawyer, she will be alert and careful not to slip up. No chance you'll get a confession out of her. But what about Amit? Isn't he a suspect too?" Priya asked.

"Seems unlikely." Nisha told Priya what she had learned.

"I'm going to talk to the club house manager and find the gardeners Monisha mentioned. Let's hope they confirm her story." Cherian said. Then she looked at Priya. "Sorry, I suspected you of sabotage."

"I never realized what I had put Reshma through. Your accusations made me see how unfair I had been with her. But Cherian, you really need to stop being such a

hot head." Priya shook her head. "It's alright." She smiled.

"I have to get back home. I'm expecting Ritu over for lunch. Priya, do let me know what Abhay finds out. Thanks so much." Nisha gave Priya a hug. "I never doubted you for a second," she whispered.

Once in the elevator, Nisha turned to Cherian. "You should talk to Jyotsna once more. Ask her to think carefully and try to remember, if there were any other sounds she heard. Something that may have seemed mundane or irrelevant to her, might still be important."

"I'll do that." Cherian nodded as they parted ways outside the society entrance.

## **Doesn't Fit**

"Ritu!" Nisha exclaimed as she exited the elevator.  
"Sorry, so sorry. How long have you been here?"

"I just came up the stairs and was about to ring the bell. But then you're outside." Ritu scratched her head.

"Yeah, sorry. I had to take care of something. Let's go in." Nisha unlocked the door.

"I guess, I am a little early," Ritu said, still looking puzzled. "I just assumed you'd be home."

Nisha told Ritu all about her visit to Priya. "Oh, my! I can't believe Cherian thought Priya would deliberately delete the footage." Ritu shook her head. "She's about as upright as they come."

"Cherian does have a tendency to jump to conclusions, but she is getting better. To be fair, she did have the evidence this time, and Priya did delete the footage, just not in the way Cherian imagined." Nisha laughed.

Ritu sniffed. "Do I smell Goan fish curry?"

Nisha smiled. "I know it's your favorite. I had Reshma make it this morning. There should be freshly cooked

rice too. Let's get some lunch."

"How is Reshma these days?" Ritu gulped, as she helped herself to the food.

"Don't worry Ritu. She never really blamed you." Nisha assured Ritu as she took out the plate of sliced onions, tomatoes and cucumbers Reshma had left in the refrigerator. "She understood. And guess what, she even forgave Cherian this morning." Nisha added, helping herself to a generous portion of the salad.

"She did? Wow! I must apologize to her. I never really did, you know." Ritu hung her head, as she carefully avoided the onions while picking out a few slices of cucumbers and tomatoes. "I was too ashamed to face her. But I think I should."

"I agree." Nisha nodded, putting the rest of the salad back in the fridge. "But you're doing a lot of good to make up for the past. I am amazed by all the volunteer work you do."

"I feel I must, to be able to forgive myself."

"So how is Sunaina doing?" Nisha asked, as they sat down with loaded plates at the dining table.

"She's doing a lot better most of the time, but still, I think Maithili's death hit her harder than I had

realized."

"Why? Did something in particular happen?" Nisha asked, separating the bones from the fish.

"This Pomfret is really fresh, Nisha. Where did you get it?"

"I ordered it online. These delivery apps make shopping so much easier, especially in Mumbai. The traffic is so frustrating, it makes me reluctant to go anywhere. But what were you saying about Sunaina?"

"Oh, right. She still has some issues. She keeps it together around me for the most part, but this morning, I was watching Ruchi while she was making breakfast. I wandered into the kitchen to get a glass of water, when I saw tears dripping down the tip of her nose. She seemed to be staring at a skillet full of scrambled eggs while it was burning. And when I saw her face, she looked angry, not sad. *What kind of loathsome lowlife murders an angel*, she hissed. I had to call out to her a few times, before she snapped out of her trance."

"It's dangerous, if she spaces out while cooking." Nisha frowned.

"Isn't it?" Ritu sighed. "When I asked her what happened, she said she had got distracted by the

memory of Maithili teaching her to make scrambled eggs. She said, they were so soft and moist, not at all like the *bhurji* she used to make before. Maithili had told her that the secret lay in cooking on a thick bottom skillet. Then she started fretting about the skillet. Apparently, it was a gift from Maithili, and she was worried she had ruined it."

"Poor dear. What about the other neighbor Jyotsna? Doesn't she help out?"

"Sunaina doesn't know her much. Jyotsna brought Sunaina a welcome gift when she first moved in with her husband. At the time, Ruchi was a little over a month old."

"Really?" Nisha interrupted. "Isn't that a strange time to move? I mean, it sounds tough."

"That's what I asked. So apparently, they had planned to move in well before the baby was born, but the contractor in charge of doing the interiors took a lot longer than they had expected. They had moved to Mumbai when Sunaina's husband, Kartik, got a promotion, and then they were staying in a service apartment until the company apartment was ready. Kartik finally paid the contractor an extra ten percent to make sure they could move in and settle down at least a couple of months before he left."

"No wonder she is so stressed out. I wonder why Jyotsna did not reach out to her. She seems like a friendly neighbor."

"I asked Sunaina about Jyotsna. It would be nice for her to have a neighbor looking out for her. And Jyotsna is right next door and home all day. But Sunaina says Jyotsna is not a big fan of babies. She came once to visit after Kartik had left town, but Ruchi spat up on her new *salwar kameez*. She was quite disgusted and never came by again." Ritu giggled, and Nisha joined her.

"Yeah, I guess, I can see that. She is the friendly sort, but not the helpful type." Nisha rolled her eyes.

"Exactly. Besides, Maithili loved Ruchi, and they got along really well, so she didn't bother with Jyotsna anymore. I must say, this fish curry is the best I've eaten in a while," Ritu licked her fingers.

"Yeah Reshma rocks!" Nisha nodded, taking both their empty plates to the kitchen. "Would you like to wash it down with some *nimbu paani*?"

"Sounds perfect," Ritu followed Nisha into the kitchen.

Nisha pointed to a drawer. Ritu opened it and pulled out two steel tumblers. "So how is your investigation

"going, Miss Marple?" she asked.

"I'm stuck. We've ruled Amit out."

"That old lady's grandson?" Ritu asked, taking a sip of her cold *nimbu paani*. She smacked her lips.

"Refreshing, right?" Nisha smiled. "Yes, it turns out he has an alibi, even he did not know about." Nisha sighed.

"How does that happen?" Ritu was intrigued.

"His niece verified his story. He did not know that she was sitting in the balcony watching him. Come, let's go sit down."

"Yikes! It seems like there are eyes everywhere. Lucky for him, I guess, though." Ritu said, stretching out on the couch reclining against the soft padded handle, while Nisha sat down on the adjacent squishy chair.

"Yes, indeed. He was the prime suspect. Now, Harish and Nina seem to be the most likely suspects. Malika is also a definite possibility, but we know much less about her. She's a lawyer, so it will be hard to get information out of her"

"Oh really? Come on, tell me. I'm so busy these days, I miss gossiping."

Nisha told Ritu everything Priya had told her about Nina.

Ritu raised her eyebrows. "Goodness, it doesn't look good for Nina. From what Priya says, if she is not the murderer, then she must be hiding something. Why else would she be so cagey? Any idea what she might be hiding?"

Nisha shook her head, but she was distracted by her phone beeping. She switched it on and was surprised to see a message from Sachi. "Wait, here is some interesting news." Nisha sat up.

"What?" Ritu got up from the sofa and stood behind Nisha's chair to peek at the message on her phone. "Whoa!" She goggled at the screen. "That's a lot of money." She gasped.

"I know! Sachi had told me about Maithili's painting in Harish's restaurant. He wasted no time in selling it at a private auction. Her murder must have jacked up the price." Nisha concluded.

"Does that count as motive?" Ritu asked.

"This is not a lot of money for the Patels, so I guess not, but still, it's surprising. I need to know more." Nisha shot Sachi a message with a few questions.

"Looks like you have a lot to figure out. Thanks for lunch. But I have to be back for a martial arts class, and I think I should check on Sunaina once more before I leave, especially after the scrambled eggs episode. I am worried about her. I think she needs to talk to a psychologist."

"Why? I mean everyone grieves, right? Isn't that normal? We all feel upset when we see something that reminds us of a dear one who has recently died."

"Yes, I mean I was a little worried by the cooking episode, but it's something else. She quite irritable. I mean, she gets it under control soon, but it bothers me."

"Really? Babies can be quite a handful. Society likes to portray motherhood as a state of blissful happiness, but it's a lot of stressful work, especially for a single parent. The sleep deprivation, endless feeding, crying, burping, colic, diaper changing etc can make new mothers quite edgy." Nisha pointed out

"Still, she is my responsibility, and I have to be careful. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"You're absolutely right, Ritu. I just couldn't help but feel sympathetic. Tushar was quite a handful for me in his first year, and I don't know how I could have managed without Raj helping. So yes, you should get Sunaina any help she needs."

"Thanks Nisha. I don't know how she'll react to someone else. She trusts me right now. I'll talk to a counselor at the women's shelter. Maybe, she will be able to advise me on how to help Sunaina better." Ritu looked at her watch. "I guess I'd better leave."

Nisha glanced at the wall clock. "Oh, right. I have a student coming, but do let me know if I can help."

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12-year-old Sarika was Nisha's newest and youngest student. A little advanced for her age, Sarika's mother was looking for someone who could help Sarika achieve her true potential, when Priya had recommended Nisha. Eager and bright, Sarika had become the highlight of Nisha's week. For once, Nisha did not have to worry about any syllabus. The two of them just explored whatever caught their fancy, and one thing led to the next.

"What's proof by contradiction?" Sarika had asked, as they were wrapping up the previous week.

So that's what they were going to explore today. "The beauty of the proof by contradiction method Sarika, is that it uses pure logic to prove a hypothesis." Nisha's eyes lit up as they always did, when she explained mathematical concepts. And logic was her favorite.

"So how does it actually work?"

"Well, the idea is, you make a proposition. Then you assume that the proposition is false."

"You assume it's false?" Sarika was intrigued.

"Yes," Nisha smiled mischievously. "So assuming the proposition is false, you make a series of logical deductions. Eventually, if you arrive at a contradiction, it implies that your assumption that the proposition is false does not hold. Therefore the proposition must be true."

"Diabolical!" Sarika was excited. "Okay, I get it. Give me a problem I can use this on."

Nisha nodded. "Prove that the tangent to a circle is perpendicular to the radius that ends on the point of contact between the circle and the tangent."

As Sarika worked on her problem, Nisha checked her messages. There was just one from Cherian that made her smile. To start with, Amit had been the prime

suspect. It had seemed like he had motive, means and opportunity. So Nisha had assumed he was likely to have murdered Maithili.

But then, Monisha's eye witness account, further verified by the two gardeners as conveyed by Cherian in her message, confirmed that Amit had indeed been on the podium level for the whole time between 8:00 and 9:00. After 9:00, several guests and the *pundit* said they had seen him doing *puja* with his father and brother until they all left together for the funeral. However, to have murdered Maithili, he would have had to be at her apartment at some point between 8:00 and 10:00. Since he could not be at two places at once, a logical contradiction, the assumption that he was the murderer must be faulty, thus proving that Amit did not murder Maithili.

Sarika chewed on the back of her pencil, as she pondered on the problem. Nisha admired her intense concentration and focus. A few minutes later, she started scribbling furiously, and soon she was done.

Nisha raised her eyebrows and put on her reading glasses to check Sarika's work. "Wow, you're very smart Sarika! This is perfect. Would you like another problem?"

Sarika nodded enthusiastically. "Okay, lets see if you can prove that the square root of two is irrational."

Nisha wrote down some questions on a sheet of paper and pushed it towards Sarika. "Some more problems for you to tackle when you're done with that one," Nisha explained.

While Sarika worked through her list of problems, Nisha replayed her conversation with Ritu in her mind. Something Ritu had mentioned had seemed important, but Nisha couldn't recall what it was. It annoyed her.

*Every lead charges towards a dead end. How am I ever going to figure out this case,* she despaired.

That evening, after Sarika left, Nisha went to see Sachi and told her all she had learned from her interactions with Harish. "I love Maithili's art," Nisha added, "but I am no expert. Is it really worth that much? I mean, she wasn't that famous, was she?"

"No, the painting was sold for a surprisingly high price." Sachi admitted. "The auction was set up pretty soon after Maithili's death to drive up the price, I guess."

"Who bought the painting?" Nisha asked.

"The buyer used a proxy and remained anonymous. There was a bidding war for a while, and then the buyer increased his bid significantly to end it quickly."

"I don't know what to make of Harish, Sachi. He is so practical about his business, and such a romantic in his artistic and love life. With Maithili, all of it was an entangled mess. Would the businessman in him be vengeful about being duped, before the romantic in him understood her reasons?"

"I have no idea. You're right. If he was the type that compartmentalized his life, this situation would have really messed with him. The way you put it, Maithili might have sounded cold and opportunistic when she told him about the baby, just because she was upset and defensive. And that could trigger a ruthless reaction."

"Then again, Nina too seems very suspicious, with her hatred of artists and volatile temper."

"Nina hated artists?" Sachi asked. "I had no idea. It's not mentioned in the gossip on the society groups."

Nisha told Sachi what Priya had told her. "I feel so lost now. And it could be the lawyer lady, Malika too."

"Oh yeah, in the society groups, quite a few people think it was her. She is such a tiger mom, and I hear she marched up to Maithili's apartment with a heavy dumbbell or something." Sachi raised her eyebrows waiting for Nisha to confirm the story.

"With a flat bottom kettlebell weight, but you can't post that on the group. In fact, you can't tell anyone, or you might jeopardize the investigation."

"Which TV show did you learn that on? *Bones*?" Sachi giggled. "Fine, I understand. But you're no fun at all," she grumbled.

"If you get to know anything else about that painting, like who bought it, or anything at all, please let me know."

"Of course. But don't worry Nish. You'll figure it out. Sooner or later, you'll find a crucial missing piece, and it will all start to make sense."

As if on cue, Nisha's phone buzzed. Her eyes lit up when she saw a message from Cherian flashing in her list of notifications. She opened it. *Jyotsna had nothing else to add. When I pressed her, she mentioned that the only other thing she had heard was Ruchi crying, just before she went for her bath, but that happens almost everyday, so nothing noteworthy.*" Nisha frowned.

"Is that it?" Sachi asked. "The missing piece?"

"Nah, just another dead end." Nisha sighed. "I should go home and get dinner ready for Raj."

Nisha had just walked into the kitchen to set the rice to cook, when the doorbell rang. Puzzled, she peeked out of the kitchen door to glance at the wall clock in the living room. *Strange, she thought. It's a little early for Raj to be back.*

Confused, she went up to the door to open it and was startled to find Harish standing there. "May I come in?" he asked, as she stood staring at him.

"Oh yes, of course. Please pardon my rudeness. I was just surprised to see you." Nisha ushered him to the sofa in her living room.

"I was wondering ..." Harish hesitated. Nisha waited patiently. "I was wondering," he began again, "if I could have that poem Maithili wrote." Harish looked up at Nisha.

"I can ask Cherian. I am sure there should be no issue with that, once the case is closed. You will have to wait until then."

"Okay, thank you. I appreciate it. I find it very difficult to talk to that police woman. You understand me better."

"No, Harry, I don't." Nisha snapped. "Why do you want the poem?"

"For sentimental reasons of course." Harry looked at Nisha, his expression bewildered and hurt. "I thought you understood that I loved her. Still do, as a matter of fact. I can't believe she is gone."

"If that's the case, how come you were so quick to sell her painting from your restaurant? Or is profit more important than sentiment? Perhaps, you're thinking of selling the poem too?" Nisha glared at him.

"Oh, you know about the painting," Harish bit his lips.

Nisha raised her eyebrows. "That's all you have to say?" She scowled.

"No, you don't understand." Harish shook his head. "My father, he sold the painting, when he heard that Maithili was murdered. You're right that he did it for a profit. He knew the news of her murder would jack up the price. He is quick to exploit sentiment. I was upset when I found out, but it was too late, and there was nothing I could do about it. You know my parents did not know of my relationship. Now, you see why I must have the poem. It's all I'll have left of her. Please."

"Fine, I'll see what I can do." Nisha muttered. "Thanks for the music you sent me," she added in a milder tone.

"Have you had a chance to listen to it?" Harish asked, meekly.

"No, but I will tonight, before going to bed. I could use some soothing music to unwind."

"Sure. I won't take up any more of your time. Thanks so much. You're my only hope." Harish shook her hand and left.

Nisha returned to the kitchen. As she washed the rice, she repeatedly hummed the tune to the song Harish and she had been singing at the funeral. "Oh I do hate it when a song gets stuck in my head," Nisha grumbled turning on the rice cooker. *I guess Harish coming over triggered it.* She sighed, putting the Goan fish curry to heat. When Raj returned from work, Nisha hugged him.

"Oh, it was that kind of a day was it?" Raj asked, patting her back when she held on tightly, not wanting to let go.

Nisha told him all about her day. He kissed her cheek, gave her another hug and then went to wash up for dinner. "I still can't tell, if Harish is more Jekyll or Hyde." Nisha called out, as Raj entered the bathroom. "He certainly is a smooth talker. So I don't trust him."

"What about Sunaina?" Raj asked, dressed in a clean set of night clothes, salivating over the Goan fish curry. "Didn't she hear anything at all that morning? I mean Jyotsna gave you such a detailed account of events. Shouldn't Sunaina have heard something too?"

"I guess she is farther away on the other side of the elevator. Sunaina also told us that Ruchi was colicky the previous night, so they were both fast asleep." Nisha frowned as her phone beeped with a message from Priya.

Nisha read the message over a few times. Then, as if on autopilot, she forwarded the message to Cherian. When she put away her phone, her expression became distant. Raj decided to savor his treat, and leave Nisha alone with her thoughts.

"Everything okay?" Raj asked, when he finished eating. He was puzzled by Nisha's pinched expression.

"Hmm.." Nisha responded pushing around the food on her plate.

Raj smiled. He stopped on his way to the kitchen with his empty plate. He placed the plate on the dining table and gently put his arm around Nisha. "Nisha," he sang out. "Nisha where have you drifted off to?" he asked snapping his fingers.

"Oh sorry," Nisha looked at her food. She had barely touched it.

"What's bothering you, Love?" Raj persisted.  
"Perhaps, I can help?"

"Not really. I mean there is all this information, but it just doesn't fit together. Something is wrong; it has to be. Only, I am not sue who is lying. I am going to have to rethink a lot of stuff, try different combinations to see which version is internally most consistent. Whatever happened, must make sense, right?"

"Absolutely," Raj nodded. "Why don't you eat quickly? Then you can go think about your problem. I'll take care of everything here."

"Thanks Raj," Nisha squeezed his hand. She wolfed down her meal without enjoyment. *What a waste of Goan fish curry*, she lamented, looking at her empty plate. As she walked towards the bedroom, she stopped and turned. "I forgot to ask about your day. How was it?"

Raj smiled. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow. You get your mystery figured out now. I need your full attention when I tell you about my day." He winked, and Nisha nodded.

She took out a notebook and began to write down the things that did not make sense, so she could review them systematically. Raj closed the door softly behind him and left to watch TV.

Nisha wrote down her thoughts feverishly, as if she was worried they would vanish before she had captured them on paper. There was so much information swimming around the page, her head hurt. *I could do with some calming music*, she thought, retrieving the pen-drive Rohan had given her.

Nisha plugged the pen-drive into her laptop and played the music at a low volume, so as not to disturb her thought process. She minimized the window for she wasn't interested in the video. The music was melodious and calm. *So unlike the outward appearance of the instrument*, she thought. As she read through her notes again, a few things became clearer.

The song now playing from the pen-drive was *Bang Bang*. *Oh no*, Nisha thought, *It's going to be stuck in my head again*, but then the voice sounded familiar. "Of course!" she exclaimed, restoring the window to full size. "This is a recording Harry made of himself." As she watched him play the steel tongue drum, she still wondered, if it could possibly be the murder weapon.

Something in the video caught her eye. She looked through the remaining mp4 files on the pen drive. There were several others of Harry playing the steel tongue drum. And then she remembered something, at the funeral too. How had she not understood then? Slowly, the identity of the murderer began to emerge. *This is a lot like sculpting*, Nisha noted. Maithili would start with a generic block of stone and then chip away the unnecessary bits, until the perfect form she had envisioned, emerged for all to see. Nisha could now see the murderer in her mind's eye. But she would still have to do her own bit of chipping, before she could convincingly reveal their identity.

Raj peeked into the room. "Can I come in?" He whispered.

"Yes," Nisha smiled. "I could use a break."

"Super," Raj handed her a plate with a piece of chocolate cake. "Those little gray cells need nourishment." He grinned. "Also, thanks for saving me some."

"You were right. Rohan really went at it." Nisha laughed. "Even I wouldn't get a piece, if I hadn't followed your advice."

Raj shrugged. "Well, I should know. I was once Rohan's age. By the way, the fish was excellent too."

"Yes, Ritu loved it. Reshma makes it so well. Did I tell you that Ritu is thinking of apologizing to Reshma?"

"She should for her own sake," Raj responded.

"Anyway, you get back to work. I can make breakfast tomorrow, if you like."

"No, you always make those buttery scrambled eggs, Raj." Nisha admonished. "I'll take care of it."

"I thought you liked my scrambled eggs." Raj pouted.

"Of course, I do. They're so delicious and soft, but ... but." Nisha stopped talking.

"But what?" Raj asked. "Honey, are you okay?" He was concerned by the unfocussed distant look in Nisha's eyes.

"but we already ate chocolate cake today," Nisha mumbled, her mind clearly somewhere else.

"Right," Raj nodded. "I guess you had a brainwave, so that's my cue to leave you alone. Go get em, Baby." He kissed the top of Nisha's head.

"I won't be long, Honey," Nisha called out as she sent Priya a quick message begging her for a couple of favors. Late as it was, Priya replied almost immediately. She agreed to both the favors and

assured her all would be taken care of. Nisha then shot out a message to Cherian. Please gather Malika, Nina, Harish, Jyotsna and Sunaina together in Maithili's apartment tomorrow morning. Priya will look after Ruchi, so Sunaina need not worry. But I will need both Sunaina and Jyotsna to be there to clear up a few things."

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"You look cheerful," Raj remarked when he arrived at the breakfast table next morning. "Did you figure it all out?" he asked, as Nisha placed her phone on the dining table. She had just finished attending to a call and looked unusually perky.

"I have a theory, but not much hard evidence. I'll have to see how things go today." Nisha shrugged. "By the way, I made you scrambled eggs, just like you wanted." Nisha smiled.

"Not nearly enough butter," Raj mumbled.

"What was that?" Nisha frowned.

"Oh, I was just saying good luck, Honey."

"Thanks," Nisha rolled her eyes, just when the doorbell rang.

"Hello Cherian, want some eggs?" Raj offered, as she walked towards the dining table.

Cherian helped herself to a spoonful. "Not enough butter," she complained.

"Hmph, feel free to complain about my cooking while I get ready," Nisha turned away and left in a huff.

Dressed in a sky blue T-shirt and black track pants, Nisha returned to the dining table looking for her scrunchie. She gathered her hair into a ponytail, pushed a few stray curls behind her ears, picked up her phone and shoved it into her right pant pocket. "I'm ready. Let's go, sort out this mystery," she told Cherian.

"I have gathered everyone together, but I haven't a clue who did it. I sure hope you know what you're doing," Cherian sighed, as they walked into Maithili's housing society.

"Well, it's not exactly making scrambled eggs," Nisha laughed.

"True," Cherian nodded, still curious about what Nisha was up to.

## **Love's Labor's Lost**

When Nisha and Cherian arrived at Sunaina's house, Priya was already there. Baby Ruchi was giggling with glee, as Priya tickled her tummy, and the expression on Priya's face could only be described as pure bliss.

"You really want one, don't you?" Nisha asked, noting the wistful expression on Cherian's face as Ruchi flashed her a smile.

"Yeah, maybe, someday. But first I'm going to have to find a man." Cherian brooded.

"It'll happen, Amy." Nisha patted her shoulder. "We need to go now. Come on." She urged Sunaina.

The three of them, left baby Ruchi with Priya and headed for Maithili's apartment.

The door was open, and Cherian's assistant from the police station was seated alone in a far corner of the room. Jyotsna, Malika, Harish and Nina were already seated next to each other on chairs arranged in a circle around where Nisha had seen the crayon outline of Maithili's body, between the wall and Maithili's work table. The tools and half carved block of stone were

still on the table. Nisha, Cherian and Sunaina occupied the remaining three empty seats which were right in front of the work table.

"Can we hurry this along? I'm a busy woman with a lot on my plate." Malika complained.

"Of course, we'll make this as quick as possible," Nisha promised. "I just have a few questions that need to be addressed, and it would be best that discrepancies, if any, between all your stories are sorted out right now." She turned to Malika. "Can you do me a favor and think back to the moment you reached here on the morning of Maithili's murder? I need you to help me with some details." Abashed by Nisha's polite response to her own rudeness, Malika nodded. Nisha smiled. "Please try to recall the situation as best you can. You said, you did not actually talk to Maithili, but did you see her?"

"No, I just sat down in the lobby to rest for a few minutes."

"But could you see into her apartment? I mean, her door was open, right?"

"I don't know. I rested my back against the wall between the elevator doors adjacent to her apartment door. So I did not see either her door, or the room inside. Then, as you know from the video, I took the

elevator on the opposite side. I walked straight into it, never turning."

"Okay," Nisha nodded, "but what about sounds? Do you remember any sounds coming from Maithili's apartment?"

Malika scrunched up her face in concentration as she thought for a while. "No." She shook her head. "It was quiet. I was trying to do breathing exercises to calm myself. So I would have noticed any sounds."

"So you're absolutely sure you did not hear this sound?" Nisha asked turning on the angle grinder and holding it to a piece of stone lying on the work table. She looked around the room.

"God, no. I would have definitely remembered that sound. It's awful." Malika heaved a sigh of relief as Nisha turned the angle grinder off.

"Jyotsna, what about you? When do you last remember hearing this tool? When Maithili was murdered this tool was yanked out. So knowing when the noise stopped would give us an accurate time of death." Nisha explained.

As Jyotsna began to speak Nisha looked around the room once again. "I told you, I heard her banging soon after 8:00 and it continued till at least 8:10 or so,

roughly, because that's when I went for my bath. When I returned, the banging was done. But I really can't be sure about this tool. I told you, from my house with my door closed, it's just like background noise. I am so used to it now, I don't even notice it. Sorry, I couldn't be of more help." Jyotsna shrugged.

"It's okay," Nisha nodded, as she narrowed her eyes and looked around. "What about you Sunaina? Could you help us out? Maybe, you noticed when the tool was turned off?"

"No, as I told you, I had a tough night with Ruchi, so I was fast asleep." Sunaina shrugged. "And like Jyotsna said, we hardly noticed the sound behind closed doors."

"Right, so Nina that brings us to you. When you came here and yelled at Maithili, you said, you stopped because you did not want to disturb her while she was working, right?" Nina nodded. "So what exactly was she doing when you saw her? I mean, was she using the angle grinder, or a chisel or sandpaper or what?"

"Oh, I.. I don't re.. re.. member." Nina stammered.

"But she must have been using the angle grinder with the earmuffs, otherwise she would have heard you yelling, right?"

"Maybe, I don't recall." Nina squirmed.

"Then you must have killed her. By your own admission you saw her alive. Malika here is quite certain she did not hear that awful sound as she put it. You were already yelling at Maithili, and you had a shovel in your hand. Don't try to deny it. Your flimsy lies did not work. Besides, you confessed to Priya that you hated artists in general. So when that grating noise provoked you, it was the last straw. You must have lost it and whacked her with the shovel."

Nina turned white as a sheet, as everyone looked at her in horror. "No," Nina shouted and sobbed. "I swear it wasn't me. "I swear. But I did tell one lie. I was scared, and that's the only reason I lied. But I did not kill her." Her whole body shook as she sobbed.

"What are you blubbering about, Woman? Get it together and explain yourself," Cherian demanded with authority Nisha had never before seen her exude. Nina stopped crying and sobered up. Nisha looked at Cherian in admiration.

"When I ... I looked into Mai ... Maithili's apartment, she was already d ... d ... dead." Everyone gasped before Nina could continue. "I was so shocked to see her lying like that, I stopped in my tracks. Then I remembered the shovel in my hands. I knew what everyone would think. Especially, after the video I had

released. I was so scared, I fled. I tried to establish that I did not have the shovel. But I swear I did not kill her. You must believe me."

"Jyotsna, please think very carefully. Did you hear Maithili respond when Nina shouted?" Nisha asked.

Jyotsna took a deep breath and then closed her eyes while she thought. "No, I did not hear Maithili respond." Jyotsna confirmed.

"I believe you Nina," Nisha nodded. "According to the forensic medical report, Maithili was most likely killed around 8:20. But your claim that you spoke to Maithili at 9:00 backed up by Jyotsna was confusing matters. Dr. Abhay Desai spoke to the medical examiner yesterday. She re-examined her notes for the exact state of the body at 11:30. She looked through her calculations carefully taking into account the temperature and humidity data for that day, keeping in mind that the door was open and the air was dusty. Her best guess puts time of death no later than 8:45 and most likely, before 8:30."

"Okay, then, I guess, I am in the clear too," Malika blurted out, relief washing over her face.

"So, you think it's me," Harish spoke with a hardened expression.

"Amit has several alibis," Nisha stated. "And you're definitely a suspect."

"You think I came here just to kill her. What evidence do you have?"

"I'll come to that, but first I have some questions for you. You came and asked me for Maithili's poetry notebook, saying that it was the only thing you had left of her. What did you mean?"

"Just what I said. The book had her innermost private thoughts, a poem about our love, and about the baby I lost even before I knew it existed."

"That makes you sound sentimental, yet it's quite evident that you are a shrewd business man. Your restaurants turn even better profits than the ones your father set up, and that's saying something. So how did the business man in you respond, when you found out that Maithili had used you and your love so she could have a baby? No business man of your caliber could overlook being duped." Nisha raised her eyebrows.

"I know you're trying to provoke me, but I had no idea Maithili was pregnant, until one of you told me."

Harish pointed at Nisha and Cherian. "So even if I were the monstrous ruthless business man you are trying to make me out to be, I still had no motive."

"We have only the word of a shrewd business man for that," Cherian snorted.

"Please," Sunaina broke her silence. "I had seen them together many times. They really loved each other."

"Yeah," Jyotsna snickered.

"If that's the case, why didn't you try to procure Maithili's painting, that was in your restaurant? That was something she had given you, after all. It must have meant a lot." Nisha asked Harish.

"I told you, my father sold it at a private action before I could do anything about it."

Malika laughed. "You could easily buy it off the buyer. I am sure it's not that special to that person."

"The buyer was anonymous." Harish sulked.

"That doesn't mean you couldn't find out," Cherian snorted.

"Perhaps I could, but doing so would be difficult without my father finding out. As I said earlier, given the situation, I would rather he not find out about Maithili."

"You're so scared to even buy her painting, in case he finds out. I can only imagine how scared you'd be of him finding out that she was pregnant with your baby." Nisha taunted.

"I'm not scared," Harish shouted. "If you must know, I was the one who bought the painting anonymously," he fumed.

Nisha whistled. But before she could speak again, there was an annoying banging sound. Confused, she went to the door. "Some scheduled repair work," she explained upon returning.

"So you lied about not knowing who bought the painting," Nisha accused, as the banging continued.

"No, I did not. I simply said that the buyer was anonymous, which he, I mean I, was," Harish retorted loudly over the noise.

"Yes, I noticed. You are skillful at conveying the wrong impression," Nisha observed just as loudly. "I wonder if you really feel as bad about Maithili's death as you imply, or if you ruthlessly killed her for deceiving you."

"I did not, and you have no evidence." Harish declared. "Have fun trying to prove your case in court," he sneered.

Nisha nodded and looked at Harish. She grimaced as the banging was replaced by a loud drilling sound. "So, Harry, I am going to ask you once again, where were you between 8:00 and 8:45 on the morning of Maithili's murder?" Nisha looked around and noted that everyone was riveted to the fiery exchange between her and Harish. Everyone, except one person. Nisha narrowed her eyes and inserted her right hand into her pant pocket and then turned back to face Harish.

"I told you I was home alone. I was practicing my music." Harish snarled, just as the sound of a baby crying, penetrated the room.

"STOP, STOP. STOP the noise" Sunaina's nostrils flared, as she waved her fists. "Stop it. The noise has woken her up. STOP IT!" she screamed, her eyes bulging.

Everyone stared at Sunaina in confusion.

Nisha went close to her. "Just like on that day," Nisha said, as the drilling became louder.

"What day? Stop the noise. Stop it!" Sunaina shouted.

"The day you killed Maithili with your skillet," Nisha replied, as Sunaina stared back in horror. Harish was

dumbstruck, and Cherian was baffled. Everyone else looked from Nisha to Sunaina and back.

"You killed Maithili with the very skillet she gave you as a gift, didn't you?" Nisha persisted.

"Maithili who did so much for you, Maithili who loved your baby and cared for her with all her heart; you killed her just when she was finally going to have a baby of her own." Nisha turned on the angle grinder, thus compounding the abominable noise from the drill outside.

"Aargh!" Sunaina clutched her hair with both hands and tugged at it. "Yes, I did it. I killed her, in spite of everything she did for me, in spite of how much she loved Ruchi. I killed her with the very skillet she gave me as a gift," Sunaina howled. "Now please, for heavens sake, can I have some peace and quiet?"

Nisha turned off the angle grinder. She stepped outside for a moment, and when she returned, the drilling had stopped and Ruchi had stopped crying. Sunaina sobbed, as she slumped down on the floor exhausted.

## Bang Bang!

"Wait! What just happened here?" Harish shook his head and blinked.

"She helped me so much, and I killed her. All because I couldn't bear that awful noise. It was driving me crazy! I tried so hard, but I WAS GOING CRAZY YOU KNOW." Sunaina bellowed.

"Why didn't you say something to her?' Nisha was crying too. "I'm sure she would have accommodated you."

"I know she would have. She was such a loving person and so sensitive. But she loved her work. She had helped me so much. How could I ask her to stop? It felt so selfish. So I put up with it." Sunaina sobbed.

"What happened that morning? You mentioned Ruchi was colicky all night?" Nisha prompted.

"Yes, yes, that's true. You must believe me. I had got only two hours of sleep, but I had woken up feeling very hungry, so I had gone to the kitchen," she paused. "But how did you know? How could you know?" Sunaina stared at Nisha, her eyes wide with fear and awe.

"Never mind that. Just get it off your chest, Sunaina." Nisha urged.

"I had just taken out the skillet she had gifted me, to make scrambled eggs, just the way she had taught me. She had told me they come out best when cooked in a skillet. Stupid woman. Always so nice." Sunaina dissolved into tears again.

"Keep going, Honey," Nisha encouraged.

"Well, that's when Maithili started hammering. I tried to keep calm. I knew it would only last a few minutes, but then Ruchi woke up from the noise. She bawled and shouted, but I managed to calm her down, and she fell asleep again. By then the banging had stopped. So I went back to the kitchen. Then I realized that Maithili might start hammering again, and I couldn't bear for Ruchi to cry all morning. So I went to Maithili's house to tell her to hold off on the hammering for the morning."

"Okay, good, so what happened then?" Nisha asked.

"I called out to her, but she couldn't hear me. She was using that stone cutting tool," Sunaina pointed at the angle grinder Nisha had just turned off. Although, that doesn't sound too bad from my apartment with the door closed, up close, it is incredibly annoying. I called out to her again, a lot louder this time, but she

still did not hear me. The noise from the tool was getting to me. I don't know what happened to me. That noise really got under my skin. The next thing I remember was her lying next to me on the floor, dead. The stone cutter got unplugged when she fell and finally, there was quiet. I looked at my hand, and I noticed I was holding the skillet."

Everyone stared at Sunaina in horror.

"Then I knew what I had done. I fled back home. No one had seen me. So I just pretended to myself that it did not happen. I kept telling myself it wasn't me, even though I knew it was." Sunaina sobbed. "Oh what have I done? What is going to happen to me?"

## The Silver Lining

Nisha was sipping tea at her dining table with Cherian and Rohan.

"How did you come to suspect her?" Cherian asked.

"And how could you possibly have known she used the skillet as a weapon? You're more frightening than Poirot and Holmes rolled into one, Lady." Rohan's voice quivered with admiration.

"What are you talking about?" Nisha was surprised.

"You weren't even there." Nisha laughed.

"Oh, the nosy lady filmed your grand finale. It's on all the society groups," Rohan explained. "Haven't you seen it?"

"What?" Nisha sputtered. "Jyotsna filmed it? How could she? And how dare she make it public?" Nisha fumed. "Cherian, did you know?" Nisha glared at Cherian.

Cherian hid behind her tea cup to avoid Nisha's wrathful gaze. "Yes," she whispered.

"What's the problem. You were superb, Lady. Here, look," Rohan took out his phone.

"No. I don't want to see it. Cherian, do something, or I'll never help you again," Nisha threatened.

"Best I can do is get it off YouTube," Cherian offered.

"It's on YouTube?" Nisha was turning apoplectic.

"Relax, Lady. She said she'd get it off YouTube." Rohan soothed. "Besides, these things have the shelf life of a couple of days. Soon people will be onto something else. Enjoy your fame while it lasts."

"True," Nisha noted, calmed by Rohan's simple factual argument.

"So, tell us how you did it," Rohan demanded.

"Well, first of all I had eliminated all our original suspects," Nisha began.

"Even Harry Potter?" Cherian raised her eyebrows. "I know we eliminated Amit together, and your amazing questioning eliminated Malika and Nina. But what about Harry Potter?"

"I knew it wasn't him." Nisha bit her lip, as Cherian goggled at her. "Nina had confused the issue with her

lie, so I needed to be sure of her. And once she told the truth, it obviously couldn't be Malika."

"Sure, but how did you know it wasn't Harry Potter?" Cherian demanded. "He could have come before 8:45."

"I'll show you." Nisha flipped open her laptop and entered her password. The screen showed a still from a video. When she hit the play button melodious sounds trickled out of the laptop speaker, while the screen showed Harish playing his steel tongue drum in his living room."

"He's really good," Rohan nodded approvingly. "But what does this prove?"

"Grasshopper, can you pull up the metadata on this file?" Nisha asked.

"Sure," Rohan obliged, tapping away at the keyboard, as he pulled up the information on the screen. "Oh!" he exclaimed.

"What?" Cherian squinted at the screen. "I see, the time stamp. Are there more?"

"Yes," Nisha rolled her eyes. "Enough to cover an hour and a half."

"No breaks?" Cherian asked.

"There were breaks. There is only about thirty minutes of recorded time, but spread out in five, more or less, evenly spaced recordings over the entire period. Presumably, he would practice each piece before recording it. Or maybe, he did not send me all the recordings."

"Or, he could have gone and murdered Maithili between recordings, couldn't he?" Cherian asked.

"Amy, look how absorbed he is in the music and his concentration remains intense in them all. I know I said he could compartmentalize, but he would have to be a full blown psychopath to have killed his lover and then immediately resumed this music like absolutely nothing happened."

"True," Cherian conceded. "So the idiot did have an alibi." Cherian shook her head. "I'm glad you grilled him. He deserved it for sheer stupidity."

"You two are mean," Rohan complained.

Cherian laughed. "But seriously, why were you going at him like that? When he said you had no evidence, I was sure you were going to skewer him with irrefutable proof." Cherian looked disappointed, and Rohan scowled.

"I had to. I needed a distraction, so Sunaina would think she was safe. The idea would work, only if she was caught completely off guard."

"I still don't understand. Why did she confess, and why did you suspect her?" Rohan asked.

"There were several things about her behavior, that though in isolation did not seem to mean anything other than the frustrations of a single mom,"

"She's not a single mom," Cherian interrupted.

"For all practical purposes, she is," Nisha sighed. "And I never realized how hard it can be for them. Not even an adult to talk to. Poor thing. I was thinking of all the times I knew she had a melt down. The first was when Harish and I were singing the song *Bang Bang*. I thought she had some form of postpartum depression, and the word baby in the song triggered it. Then Ritu mentioned that Sunaina had another breakdown when she was cooking scrambled eggs. I did not understand what could have triggered the anger Ritu described."

"What do you mean?" Rohan was confused. "What happened when she was cooking?"

"Ritu said she completely spaced out while cooking scrambled eggs. Apparently, she kept staring at the

skillet, but not really looking at it. Ritu tried to attract her attention and that's when she noticed that Sunaina looked angry."

"Oh, I see," Rohan nodded.

Nisha smiled. "See what?" Cherian asked.

"That's when you realized the skillet could be the weapon used to kill Maithili." Rohan supplied.

"Yes, after I eliminated Harish, I was a little lost." Nisha admitted. "I was worried about Sunaina, and I had had a sudden hunch about her. So I looked up postpartum depression along with anger and came across a lesser known condition called postpartum rage. Apparently, it can drive women to fits of uncontrolled, irrational anger. And from the beginning of this case, I had wondered if the noise from the sculpting had got Maithili killed."

"Suddenly, it all made sense. Postpartum rage with the sculpting noise acting as a trigger, and the skillet as the handy weapon, all fit together. So, Amy," Nisha turned to face Cherian, "when I remembered your message about Jyotsna hearing Ruchi cry that morning, I knew I was right. I mean, why else would Sunaina lie about being asleep the whole time?"

"Oh, right! I forgot about that." Cherian shook her head. "So why didn't you say anything then?" she asked.

"I had the perfect theory that all fit together, but I still had no proof. Not a shred of hard evidence. I mean even Jyotsna only vaguely remembered Ruchi crying and only mentioned it when you pressed her. Also, two people could have been equally affected by the noise from Maithili's work. And perhaps, I was mistaken somehow about Jyotsna. I had to get a confession."

"You were lucky, the maintenance work was scheduled for that time, and even Ruchi cried at the strategic moment," Cherian laughed.

"Lucky?" Nisha snorted. "I had Priya arrange for both."

"What? Cherian goggled at Nisha. "You ... you ..."

"Lady," Rohan gasped, "I'm impressed. You are devious. Wow!"

"You asked Priya to make Ruchi cry?" Cherian stared at Nisha in disbelief. "And she agreed?"

"It was only for a few seconds," Nisha sounded defensive. "It took a lot of convincing, but Priya

agreed when I called her and asked her that morning. I had told her I'd send her a missed call if and when I needed it done, so it could be timed correctly. I had put her number on speed dial, before putting my phone in my pocket."

Cherian and Rohan stared at Nisha, who felt like a ruthless monster.

"I had to okay?" Nisha tried to explain herself. "I needed both Sunaina and Jyotsna to be off their guard and see which one overreacted to the noise. That's why I couldn't tell any of you what I was thinking. But to get a better idea, I conducted a little experiment. If you recall, I switched on the angle grinder when I was asking Malika if she had heard the sound. At that time, I looked around the room to check everyone's expression and I noticed only Sunaina's eyes flashed with anger, just for a few seconds. That's when I knew it was her. To double check my conclusions, I asked Jyotsna if she could pinpoint the exact time the tool was turned off and again watched everyone's expression. Sunaina first became tense, but when Jyotsna replied that she had no idea, she relaxed, considerably, and I was convinced beyond doubt, but I still needed a confession."

"But why did you accuse Harish so dramatically even though you knew it wasn't him?" Cherian pressed her

temples. "This is so convoluted and confusing," she mumbled.

"I had arranged with Priya for the noise to coincide with the time I created the whole ruse with Harish. It seemed authentic, since Harish wasn't aware of it. In spite, of being so distracted, Sunaina could not ignore the noise. Especially not when she heard Ruchi cry. The simultaneous sounds of the hammer, angle grinder, as well as the drill, which sounds quite similar to the angle grinder, coupled with Ruchi crying took her compellingly back to the worst moment of her life, the moment she had been trying so hard to block out."

"Rohan is right. You're scary," Cherian said, just as awestruck.

"Without evidence to support my theory, I had to get a confession. That's why I needed Sunaina to believe that we thought someone else, in this case, Harish, was the murderer, so she would be off her guard. "

"Well you got it all right." Cherian sounded envious and a little frightened. "Thanks to you, we have solved the case."

"I know." Nisha sighed.

"You, don't sound very happy, Lady," Rohan observed.

"I'm not. I had a text from Ritu this morning. Sunaina finally met with a psychiatrist. She has been diagnosed with postpartum rage. There is no pleasure in catching the bad guy in the real world, Grasshopper." Nisha bit her lips

"No, but in the real world, there is satisfaction in getting people the help they need. Don't you think Sunaina's condition would have become worse if it festered? You shed light on a terrible tragedy, Lady. Now Maithili's parents can get closure knowing that no one killed their daughter-in-law in hate. Even Sunaina can begin to heal. I'd say, you out did Miss Marple this time, Lady." Rohan nodded.

"You sure know how to find the silver lining, Grasshopper." Nisha smiled.

"Hear, hear," Raj added.

"How long have you been spying on us?" Nisha asked, turning pink. "I thought you were taking your Sunday nap."

"Long enough to know what an awesome person I married," Raj smiled.

"Yew, are you two going to get all mushy?" Cherian scowled.

Nisha glared at her.

"So what's going to happen to the baby?" Rohan changed the subject.

"Temporarily, she is still staying with her mother, and Ritu is staying with them. A message has been sent to her father. He will be back within a week, and then he will have to take custody." Cherian replied

"Priya will be helping them too, I guess." Nisha added. Then she turned to Cherian, "Hey, what about your promise to me?"

Cherian put her hand in her pocket and fished out a card. "This is a special visitor pass usually given to family members. With this you can use our grounds anytime you like."

"Oh Amy," Nisha teared up. "I had no idea you thought of me as family." She pulled Cherian into a rib-cracking hug.

Cherian looked simultaneously embarrassed and pleased. "What about your promise?" she asked.

"We'll go to Decathlon and buy skates tomorrow," Nisha smiled, "and then I'll teach you."

"I can teach you," Rohan offered. "Then can I come and skate in the police colony too?" Rohan looked hopefully at Cherian.

Cherian firmly shook her head. Rohan shrugged. "I had to try," he said looking sheepish.

"By the way Nisha, I just saw you on YouTube." Raj announced. "Did you know your video has got over a million views? My wife is a celebrity!" he gloated as Cherian and Rohan edged out of their sets hoping to make a quiet getaway.

"CHERIAN," Nisha shouted.

"I'm on it. I'm on it," Cherian repeated, hastily putting on her shoes, as she and Rohan made a beeline for the door.

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