



# The Picture That Changed

By Kanika G

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# The Picture That Changed

*Ain't karma a bitch? Cosmic Justice is Best Served Cold! Spit for Spat!*

These, and other intriguing headlines were splashed across the front page. It had been the trial of the century, widely publicized on mainstream and social media. The sleepy little town of Debron, nestled among the cornfields of Nebraska, had made headlines in all the national newspapers, and the locals enjoyed the attention.

The facts were mind boggling, and the courtroom drama, fascinating. But the story winds its way several years into the past.

## **5 years before the present**

Eight-year-old Maya was engrossed in coloring a fantasy world of unicorns, pink mist and delightful chimeras of fireflies and butterflies. "Chimeras don't have to be frightening, evil or grotesque, do they,

Teacher?" she had asked, her earnest eyes fearful of the possibility. "They can be good too, right?"

"Of course they can be good, Darling." Miss Penny, the second grade teacher at Debron elementary school, had reassured her.

Relieved, Maya had pushed back her stray dark curls behind her ears and proceeded with her drawing. Now she was lost in the world of magic and enchantment, as she made it skillfully come alive with crayons.

"Maya. Maya, Honey," Miss Penny called out in vain, trying to get her attention. So, she gently tapped Maya's shoulder. Maya jumped. "Sorry, Honey. I did not mean to startle you, but your grandma has come to pick you up."

"Nana?" Maya was confused. "Why?"

"I don't know. But she says she has to take you home with her, right now. She'll explain everything, soon."

When Maya seemed puzzled and a little alarmed, Miss Penny gave her a hug, and then escorted her to the school lobby, where Nana was waiting.

"Nana, what happened? Why are you here?" Maya's eyes were wide with fear and confusion.

When Nana handed her a lollipop, Maya stared. Nana had always disapproved of candy. Something terrible must have happened, she thought.

As Nana led Maya to her car she said, "Maya, your mom is in hospital ..."

"What? What happened to Mama?" Maya asked, her worst fears confirmed. "She's not dead is she?" Maya had to know for sure.

"No, Maya. Of course not. You shouldn't say such things." Nana admonished, but then she continued in a gentler voice, "The doctors are taking care of her, but they have to do a difficult procedure, and I need to be there if my consent is required for anything. So I would not be able to come and pick you up later. We will be going to the hospital now, to wait while the doctors treat your mom. I have brought some of your story books with me in the car. You must sit there quietly and read while we wait. Can you do that?"

Tears leaked out of Maya's eyes, but she wiped them away as she nodded. Nana was right. She had to be brave for Mama. After all, they only had each other. Nana always came over when Mama needed any help, and she was very nice, even if a little stern, but on most days, it was just Mama and her against the challenges of the world. Tears streamed down Maya's

cheeks as she tried to imagine a world without Mama, and this time, she did not even try to stop them. Nana pressed her hand. It was the tenderest gesture she had ever shown Maya. But Maya understood. After all, Mama was Nana's daughter.

"She's had a stroke. We have been able to stabilize her," the doctor informed. "Would you like to see her?"

"When can we all go home?" Maya asked, her innocent wide eyes fixed on the doctor.

"Your mother will have to be here for a few more days," the doctor explained unable to meet her gaze, "but it will be a lot longer than that before she is okay," he added, feeling inexplicably compelled to tell the truth. "Yes, let's see, how it goes. You never know with these things," he added, patting Maya's shoulder. Desperate to get away from her intense yet innocent gaze, he mumbled something about an emergency.

Maya resumed school the next day. In the evening, when she saw Mama at the hospital, she was terrified. "Mama are you in pain?" she asked stroking Mama's blonde curls. She often wished she had blonde hair too.

Mama slurred an answer. When Maya tried to hug her, Mama could barely move her arm. It was nothing like the bear hugs she used to give her. A tear leaked out of Mama's eye. *At least I have her eyes*, Maya thought, looking into Mama's soft brown almond eyes.

And so does Nana, she noted, turning to face her grandma. "Nana, what's going to happen to us? Who will look after us?" Maya's world was crashing down on her.

"Honey, I'm going to move in with you, and I'll look after you both, until your mom recovers. I promise." Nana hugged Maya.

It was such an unusual thing for the strict and stern Nana to do, that for a moment Maya was too stunned to think of anything else. She gave into Nana's warm embrace, and only then did she realize just how much she needed it.

### ***A week went by...***

Maya got used to having Nana at home, but the best news was how quickly Mama was recovering. Even her doctors were shocked. Mama could already walk with a limp, and her speech had improved rapidly. Her doctors recommended her to a specialist, Dr. Soren. Worried that such an unnatural recovery could not be

good news, Mama, Nana and Maya waited in Dr. Soren's office while he studied Mama's reports and scans.

"I need to run more tests, but I think this is very good news!" he smiled. Responding to the puzzled expressions on the three faces, he added, "I think you're a chimera." He nodded at Mama, leaving her baffled. She looked at Nana who, shrugged just as puzzled.

Only Maya nodded sagely. "A chimera!" she danced. "I knew there were good ones. I must tell Miss Penny."

## **14 years before the present**

It was a party! The graduates from Williams High School in Linton, were gathered together in Rachele Brown's house to celebrate their successful completion of high school. Some had been accepted into colleges of their choice, while a few had got jobs. Others were still figuring out their path or waiting to hear from various institutions. Millicent had been accepted at a community college about a hundred miles away from home to study nursing, and she was looking forward to the adventure. Whatever the

graduates had planned next, the atmosphere was festive and celebratory.

Some of the youngsters had managed to sneak in a keg of beer and several bottles of vodka. Rachele's parents were out of town, which was why her house had been chosen for the party.

Millicent wasn't much of a party person, so when the party became too noisy, she wandered off in search of the library. She had always wanted to see it. Rachele's mother, a literature teacher, was known throughout Linton for her love of books, and Rachele's father, a rich and successful lawyer, indulged his wife by dedicating an enormous room to her book collection. The library in Rachele's house was known to house at least twenty thousand books across various genre, and Millicent was eager to see it for herself.

As Millicent wound her way through the enormous house, she appreciated the tasteful mahogany furniture and expensive Turkish carpets. At a deserted corridor, she was trying to gather her bearings, when she heard someone stumble around the corner.

Collin Hammond, the handsomest boy in class, six feet tall, with cold gray eyes and short dark hair was also a jerk, and evidently drunk. Millicent sighed as she rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe she had once

had a crush on him. She hoped he was drunk enough for her to pass by unnoticed. But she wasn't so fortunate.

"Millyss," he slurred. "You have a crusshh on me, they say." He eyed her lecherously.

Millicent tried to edge away quietly in disgust, but he caught her by her wrist. Taken by surprise, she tried to break free. His grip was unexpectedly firm for someone so drunk. Struggling, Millicent screamed hoping to attract attention. When she heard footsteps approaching, she looked hopefully around the corner. Collin too was distracted for a moment, but then he smiled, as he heard Fred calling out.

Fred was Collin's sidekick, and by the looks of it, just as drunk as him, Millicent concluded.

"What have we here?" Fred smirked, and the two boys winked at each other.

The house was large with thick walls. No one heard Milly's screams, and Collin had had his way with her. Fred never got his chance, for Rachele's parents were back earlier, than expected. The boys scampered away, leaving Millicent burning with shame. Huddled in her torn, stained clothes, she fled into the night.

Annette, Milly's mother, was furious. She pushed Milly to fight her shame and file a complaint with the local police. But nothing came of it besides some humiliating tests and medical procedures.

Collin had never failed to use a condom, even in such a situation, of which Milly later learned there had been several, so there was no DNA evidence of his sperm. Although he had spat on her face, Millicent had washed it away vigorously as soon as she had got home, and before Annette could stop her.

A week later, Annette took Milly away on a holiday to the sunny beaches of southern California, hoping to revive her spirits by distracting her from the stench of Collin, Fred and the rest.

"At least, he used a condom, Honey," Annette had consoled, "So there won't be any infections or pregnancy. Forget the loser, sweetheart. Just go on with your life. Keep going and do the things you always planned to. Then he won't have the power he craved."

Tears leaking out of her eyes, Milly nodded. Her mom was right. Things could have been so much worse. As it stood, she had a strong mind, and she would not let Collin mess with it.

But a week into the vacation, Milly began to feel worried. She should have got her period already. Perhaps the trauma of the incident had thrown her clockwork like cycle out of whack. She waited another week, and then another. It wasn't so unusual to skip a period she thought. It had happened to many of her friends. It wasn't until she was seized by intense bouts of nausea on three consecutive days, that she started to worry. After all, condoms were known to malfunction occasionally, especially if not used properly.

Panic engulfed her, as she contemplated the idea of being pregnant with her tormentor's baby. Now, she could never forget the sickening incident. All over again she felt dirty, but unlike the saliva, this could not be simply washed away. She forgot about her day's plans to meet her cousin at Venice beach and learn surfing. Instead, she rushed over to the nearest supermarket and picked up a dozen pregnancy tests.

When Annette returned from a day of antiquing, she was surprised to find the motel room door unlocked. Milly wasn't supposed to be back until after dinner. Milly's blank stare frightened Annette, and then she noticed the pregnancy tests and their wrappers littering the floor.

"They're all positive," was all Milly could say. She had cried so much all day, that although her eyes were

red, she had no tears left.

"But how?" Annette sighed and shook her head. She gave Milly a hug. "Don't worry, we'll manage, Dear. You can still go to college."

## **13 years before the present**

The year at community college earning a diploma in nursing had been the toughest one yet in Milly's life. Her mom had been very helpful, but managing difficult college courses while pregnant was no joke. Even through Christmas break, she had crammed between bouts of intense nausea whilst nursing a backache. Struggling through finals between feeds, whilst coping with midnight colic had taken its toll.

Yet, all of that, was not nearly as bad as being back home, Milly realized. She couldn't bear the sight of Collin, who back from college for his summer holidays, smirked every time their paths crossed. The four year state college he went to, was a mere thirty miles away, and he was often back on weekends.

Eager to get far away from him, Milly had applied for jobs all over the state, even though she had already been offered one at the local hospital.

"You're brave Milly," Rachele said when she came by one day. "I couldn't do it. I wish I had, though. Dad tried to make me, but I just couldn't." She added cradling baby Maya.

"You mean?" Milly's eyes widened. "When?"

"A couple of months after you left for college. He was back for the weekend and gate crashed my birthday party. I didn't want him there, after I knew what he had done to you, but you know how he is, so popular, and does exactly what he likes. He called it his birthday gift." Rachele cried hot tears of shame. "He's done it once to many of us, I have found out over the last year. He only bothers you so much, because you complained to the police, but I'm glad you did. Even if nothing came of it, I'm glad you did." Rachele squeezed Milly's hand. "Hang in there girl. He's going to make trouble, but I know you're strong. Hang in there for all of us."

Milly was speechless, and relieved when she finally was offered a job in the obscure town of Debron, a good two hundred miles from home. It was perfect. Until her daughter Maya turned a year old, Annette looked after her at home. Milly came home on every weekend and holiday, but hardly ever left the house. Eventually, once she was well settled, she took Maya with her. The hospital she worked at, had a daycare for

children of its employees. Annette often visited and all was well.

## **1 year before the present**

The relationship between Maya and Milly had blossomed, especially since Dr. Soren's fascinating revelation three years ago. Mother and daughter were best friends and cherished their little secret.

Milly had completely recovered from her stroke and was fitter than ever before. Grateful for her miraculous recovery, she had vowed not to take it for granted. She had altered her lifestyle to incorporate a balanced wholesome diet and a regular exercise routine. The stroke of luck as she now called it, had alerted her to the importance of a healthy mind and body, and she religiously adhered to her routine.

Maya had enthusiastically supported Milly in her lifestyle changes, and the two of them went on a six mile cross-country run every Sunday morning. It was on one such morning, life that was going so well, dealt them another severe blow.

As they ran on the wooded muddy path on side of the deserted highway, they noticed a car driving into town. Curious about the unfamiliar car, they stopped to look.

Milly froze when her eyes locked with the man on the passenger seat. "NO. No. Noo," she cried as she sat down on the mud path. "This can't be happening to me. Why now?"

"What happened Mama? Who was that?" Maya was puzzled. "You look like you've seen a ghost." She put her arm around Milly to comfort her.

"It was a ghost." Milly nodded, after taking a few deep breaths to steady herself. "That man is your father."

"What?" Maya stared.

On occasion, when Maya had asked about her father, Milly had always hastily changed the subject. As Maya had approached her pre-teens, she had assumed her birth had been the result of casual sex. Maya did not really care about her father for her life was perfect, but she couldn't help but feel curious sometimes. However, once she had figured out that the subject was somehow painful to her mother, she had stopped bringing it up.

"He raped me," Milly whispered, her face and tone devoid of expression.

Maya wasn't too surprised. If she was being honest, the possibility had occurred to her, although she had

tried to ignore it. But to have it confirmed so bluntly, made her feel sick. Bile rose to her mouth as she looked at her mother's slumped figure with a mixture of pity and disgust, until she saw her mother's lovely tear stained face.

Revulsion once again overwhelmed her, but this time it was directed towards herself. How could she have ever glanced at her mother that way? Maya had always been proud of having a strong and independent mother, but until today, she hadn't realized just how strong Milly was.

In that moment of disgust and revulsion, Maya realized she had experienced a minuscule fraction of what Milly must have felt. Maya realized she must be a constant reminder of that traumatic event. Yet, her mother had filled her life with cheer, joy and love. Never had Maya experienced a trace of resentment or disgust in her mother's love. Only then did Maya understand what real strength looked like.

Milly briefly told Maya about the night that had led to her existence and the difficult couple of years that followed. But she made it quite clear that she did not want to dwell on it, so Maya bit back a million questions that were threatening to burst out of her. She needed to be strong for her mother, just like her mother had been for her.

The days that followed brought worse news. The chance sighting of Collin wasn't a temporary blip in their serenity.

Collin's father had owned a small hotel in Linton. But the business had grown since Collin had returned to help run it, after completing his MBA. Adding modern amenities and employing marketing gimmicks, Collin had tripled their profits in just a few years. Thrilled with the success Mr. Hammond had wisely invested the profits in buying new properties in nearby towns. He envisioned owning a massive chain of hotels throughout the state someday.

Milly knew nothing of these developments, and had no idea that the hotel that was being built in Debron was on one of Mr. Hammond's properties. The construction was complete and Mr. Hammond had sent Collin to oversee the commencement of hotel operations. So it was a rude shock to Milly when she learned that Collin would be living in Debron.

In the days that followed, Milly would sometimes run into Collin at the supermarket. On their third encounter, he recognized her. He did not say anything, but since then he always smirked or leered at her.

A month later Milly found herself sinking into depression. She considered moving, but she did not

want to. Maya was well settled in school, and she had a good job. Annette was furious when she heard about Collin, but Milly begged her not to say or do anything.

"Mama, we have a wonderful life. It angers him to see that. So he is trying to ruin it for you. Don't let him succeed. Every time he sneers or leers, all you have to think is how it must annoy him to see you happy and successful."

Milly and Annette looked at Maya in surprise. "Are you sure you're just a teen?" Milly asked. "You sound like you should be collecting social security," she winked. "When did you get so wise?" She pulled Maya into a hug.

Annette smiled. In spite of everything fate had thrown their way, they had done well. *Not in spite of*, she corrected herself. There had been good things too, Milly's miraculous recovery from the stroke, for example. She said a silent prayer of gratitude.

## **6 months before the present**

When Collin's passive attempts to intimidate Milly failed repeatedly, he began to get more aggressive. But Milly wasn't scared of him. He began to stalk her, but this too seemed to have no effect. She ignored him.

One day, as she took a shortcut through a dirt road on her way home from work, he grabbed her by her ponytail. Milly was prepared. Struggling to push him away, she plunged her free hand into her pocket and pulled out a pepper spray. Without the slightest hesitation, she sprayed fiercely aiming for his face. Coughing and sputtering, he let go of her. She laughed before walking away, leaving him squirming on the dirt road, his face swollen and eyes watering as he struggled to breathe.

When he realized he could not rattle her, he was furious. He spent the evening stewing in his humiliation and pain, whilst plotting revenge. His depraved mind was quick to identify Milly's greatest weakness and eager to exploit it.

## **5 months before the present**

Thirteen-year-old Maya was engrossed in painting a fantasy world of unicorns, pink mist and delightful chimeras of fireflies and butterflies. Over the years she had learned several new tricks and techniques graduating from crayons to paints, brushes and palette knives. Her style was more sophisticated, her strokes more controlled and confident, but Miss Penny would know in an instant that the painting that eventually won the national fantasy art contest that year was a

product of Maya's fertile imagination. It radiated the same sparkling innocence that she had found fascinating in the simple crayon drawing almost five years ago.

After submitting her entry for the contest, Maya packed up her art supplies in her backpack, slung it over her shoulder and left. It was late afternoon and the roads were deserted. As Maya walked on the sidewalk, she heard footsteps approaching from behind. Surprised, she turned around and froze.

"Hello, there. Your mother must have told you who I am," a man panted, as he caught up with her.

Maya stared at him at a loss for words.

"I am your father, Maya. Give me a hug." He leered.

"You raped my mother!" Maya screeched, finally finding her voice.

"Still, makes me your father, doesn't it?" He winked. "Come on girl. Give your old man a hug." He snorted and laughed, as she sped away. "Give my love to your mother," he called out as she disappeared around the corner.

## **4 months before the present**

"He actually groped you?" Milly was furious. Maya had told her that Collin had been intimidating her for a while, but when Milly had complained to the local police, they had said there wasn't much they could do as leering, smacking his lips or walking near Maya weren't actual offenses, especially when there were no witnesses.

Maya nodded feeling dirty. "He's horrible, Mom. Can't we just move?" she asked choking on her tears. The last month had taken its toll on her. Her soft and lively features, had hardened to cope with a cruel reality.

"No!" Milly's eyes flashed. "I am not running from him, again. Let's go to the police. Groping is assault."

"Mom, no. Please. They won't believe you, and there are no witness. We've complained before. They'll think we're just trying to get him arrested. That's what he said." Maya broke down, and her body shook as she sobbed.

Angry as Milly felt, she knew what Maya had said was true. Even when she was raped, the police did not believe her, for the lack of DNA evidence.

Suddenly Milly was seized by a flash of inspiration. As she looked into the distance thinking hard, Maya

was terrified. She had never seen that determined look in her mother's eyes before. It frightened her even more than the encounter with Collin. In that moment, Milly knew what she had to do, and she needed Maya's help.

That evening Milly told Maya her plan. Maya was horrified. She tried to dissuade her mother, but Milly was determined.

The next day, Collin's dead body was found on the dirt road shortcut where Milly had only a couple of months ago sprayed him with mace.

The investigation and court case lasted a long time, but it was finally coming to a close.

## **2 days before the present**

The prosecutor, Mr. Snyde was gleeful. Things were finally going his way. The case had been a total nightmare. He'd have welcomed the media attention, had he been winning. But somehow, what should have been a simple open and shut case had gone awry. But he was back in control.

True there had been no witnesses, but it had all begun so well. All the police complaints Milly had filed

against Collin made her a prime suspect. Snyde had even upset Maya so much with his ruthless questioning that she had broken down on the stand and confessed, that the man who had raped her mother had groped her just the day before his murder.

Maya had even admitted that Milly had told her that she would murder Collin the next day. Trapped by Snyde's skillful questioning, Maya had blubbered all the details of how her mother had planned the murder. Evidently, she had been under great strain, for she confessed she had begged Milly not to go through with her plan, afraid that they would get caught. Mr. Brown, Milly's lawyer had not been able to prevent this outburst despite all his objections.

"Sorry Mom. Sorry," Maya had wailed loudly and pitifully as she left the stand. Mr. Snyde had sighed with satisfaction, when he had seen that the jury had bought it. All sympathy for Milly had vanished from their expressions. They now considered her a cold blooded killer. Everything had been perfect, until ...

"Liar!" Milly had screeched. "I can't believe you'd do this to me. After everything I've done to protect you. You know YOU murdered him, Maya. You know you did. I was only trying to protect you. How could you throw me under the bus, when I was only trying to protect you?" Milly had shouted, as spit flew out of

her mouth. Her hair disheveled and fire in her eyes, she had turned to the jury. "Fine," she had shouted. "Fine. If it has to be this way, I'll tell the truth." Her voice had become steady after she took a deep breath. "Everything Maya has said is true, except for one tiny detail. She reversed our roles. She made the plan when Collin assaulted her, and begged me to help her carry it out. I tried to discourage her, but she was determined." Tears had streamed down Milly's face, as she looked unblinkingly at each of the twelve jurors.

The jury had looked confused. Was it possible that Milly was indeed protecting Maya? She was her mother after all. And all the circumstantial evidence could have applied to Maya as well, couldn't it?

Mr. Snyde had felt dizzy as he saw his case falling apart in one fell swoop. He had to salvage it. He had to prove it was Milly, beyond all reasonable doubt. He had to think fast. One could almost see the gears in his brain turning.

And then it came to him! What luck that Maya had mentioned this little detail in her testimony. His countenance cleared of wrinkles, his muscles relaxed, and his triumphant smile returned as he called Maya back to the stand. He had almost missed it, but now it would clinch the case for him, beyond all reasonable doubt.

"Maya, you said you saw your mother spit on Mr. Collin after murdering him, didn't you?"

"I begged her not to shoot him," Maya sobbed. "I don't know why she is accusing me. I begged her not to do it. You must believe me. What kind of mother does this?"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Snyde nodded, impatiently. "But you said earlier, that she spat on Mr. Collin?" he asked.

"Yes, she did! On his face, several times. Some even fell on his mustache," Maya volunteered hurt by her mother's betrayal.

"No!" Milly screamed. "Maya, you know you're the one who did it after shooting him. Why are you doing this?"

"Calm down, ladies. There is a simple way to resolve this," Mr. Snyde declared. "We'll do a DNA analysis on the remains of the spit on his mustache, and check which of you it matches. What do you think Maya?" Snyde asked with a satisfied smile.

"Fine by me!" Maya snorted.

"As long as you test her DNA too," Milly snarled. "I am done protecting her."

"You have one day, Snyde." The judge banged his gavel. "Expedite the tests and get the results by tomorrow morning. The court will reconvene at noon tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Honor," Snyde nodded and left with a spring in his step.

The next day the jury returned the verdict, "NOT GUILTY!"

## **5 years before the present**

"What do you mean, a chimera? Isn't that some mythical being?" Milly asked.

"Yes, a chimera is a hybrid creature, and that's what you are. Moreover, that's what is saving you." Dr. Soren could barely contain his glee.

"I need to confirm my theory with a few tests, but I believe what we are seeing here, is that fetal cells from Maya that entered Millicent's body during her pregnancy, are now rapidly healing the parts of her brain that were damaged during the stroke. It's not uncommon for fetal cells to cross the placenta barrier and vice-versa. Most mothers are chimeras whether they know it or not."

"It's a miracle!" Nana thanked the lord.

Milly had mixed feelings.

## **4 years before the present**

Milly had to go for a regular quarterly checkup ever since she had the stroke. A year had passed and she had completely recovered. Dr. Soren, who was studying her miraculous recovery was pleased to see that she had brought Maya along.

"May I test both your DNA by taking samples from a few different parts of you," he asked. "I want to get a better understanding of how chimeric cells spread when they are healing a stroke."

Milly looked at Maya and they both nodded. "But do tell us what you find Dr. Soren," Milly requested. "I am a nurse, and I like to keep in touch with the latest research in medicine. Someday, when Maya is in college perhaps, I hope to go to graduate school. In the mean time, I try to keep learning what I can, so I don't get rusty."

"Oh, of course. I'll let you know. I'll even send you a copy of the paper I am going to publish on the subject." His eyes shone with eagerness. He diligently

collected samples of Maya's and Milly's saliva, fingernails, tears, hair on their legs and a skin from their back for DNA testing.

True to his word, Dr. Soren sent the results of the DNA tests. The DNA from the tears and saliva taken from both Milly and Maya were identical, although DNA from other parts of their body differed. Milly's saliva, tears and nasal mucus had Maya's DNA. Several repeated tests over the next couple of years confirmed this beyond a shred of doubt.

Dr. Soren published a seminal paper on the subject. He hypothesized that the healing fetal cells in Milly's brain had spread to various glands in her head. While more research remained to be carried out on the subject, Milly's saliva would always contain Maya's DNA, and she knew it!

## **4 months before present**

Milly had used the knowledge of abnormal DNA in her spit to hatch her plan to murder Collin. After all, Collin had gone scot-free on a rape charge because she had wiped away his spit. It seemed like poetic justice, that her spit on him should acquit her of his murder.

But Milly was no expert in legal matters. She needed a lawyer who would really understand her and share her motivation. And suddenly she knew just who could help. She drove to Linton and knocked on Rachele's door. Rachele no longer lived there. Milly had been to her wedding eight years ago. She had bid the happy couple farewell as they left for their new home in Seattle.

So Milly was not surprised when Mr. Brown opened the door. It was him she had come to see, after all. She told him of everything that had happened.

He sobbed remembering how long Rachele had struggled after her unhappy birthday party. "Of course, I'll help you," he said. "But you must trust me completely, and do exactly as I say. I won't let him ruin yet another little girl's life." Milly realized he was talking about Maya, wishing he had been able to protect Rachele, the way Milly had finally succeeded with Maya.

Milly knew she could trust him, and she and Maya followed his instructions to the letter.

## **1 day before the present**

Snyde sweated profusely as he entered the court room.

"What do the DNA test results show?" the judge asked.

"Um, Your Honor, I --- I ne --- need more time," Snyde stammered.

"Denied!" the judge barked, banging his gavel. "The results, Mr. Snyde," he demanded tapping his fingers.

"They match both Milly and Maya," Snyde mumbled.

There was a stunned silence in the courtroom.

Mr. Snyde fumbled through his closing arguments. The jury barely deliberated for a few minutes.

Their verdict was unanimous. This was a case of reasonable doubt, if ever there was one!

Mr. Brown congratulated Milly. You know you're protected by double jeopardy, right?" he asked.

Milly nodded, tears of relief gushing from her eyes. "Thankyou," she kept repeating as she shook Mr. Brown's hand until Rachele arrived by his side.

Rachele had come all the way from Seattle to attend the final day of the trial. So had several women from Linton, all victims of Collin's depravity.

Soon after the verdict was announced, Rachele had wound her way through the crowd of journalists to hug her father. "This one is for you, Baby," he croaked, tears streaming down his cheeks. Then she approached Milly. The girls hugged for almost five minutes. Neither said a word. They did not need to.

## **Present**

Milly was humming as she watered the plants in her house. The newspapers with the jubilant headlines lay scattered around the coffee table. It had been ages since she had seemed so carefree, Maya noted. It was as if all her burdens had been lifted. But Maya did not share in her relief.

Something had changed inside Milly. Maya had seen her mother murder her father in cold blood. It was as if monster had left her father's dying body to find refuge inside her mother.

Maya looked down on the desk she was sitting by, and noticed that she had been absentmindedly doodling with her crayons. The picture was familiar, and yet Miss Penny would not have recognized it. The mist was redder, the unicorn sad, and worst of all, the chimera of the butterfly and firefly had a disturbing quality to it.

Miss Penny had said that chimeras could be good, but Maya wondered. Perhaps they housed too much conflict, and what constituted good, Maya wasn't sure anymore.