

# The Only Suspect



By Kanika G

# **The Only Suspect**

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## At the Police Station

"I've told her a million times to let me know, if she needs a day off. It's not like I have ever refused her leave. How hard is it to just call and let me know?" Nisha grumbled to no one in particular. She tried calling her maid Reshma for the fifth time, but yet again, there was no answer. Nisha gave Reshma every Sunday off, so it infuriated her if she did not show up on a Monday. *Maybe, that's why she didn't tell me,* Nisha mused, gnashing her teeth, as she pushed her spectacles back up in place. They'd get slightly dislodged every time she bent her head to type on her phone.

As Nisha stomped around the living room of her tenth floor apartment in suburban Mumbai, a couple of locks of curly dark hair broke free from her bushy ponytail. Eventually, she exhausted her energy and calmed down. This behavior was most unlike Reshma, she brooded, unless... *She must have some stupid relatives over,* Nisha concluded. *She panders to them, and can't even spare a minute to let me know she needs the day off. Yet, those relatives never help her when she needs anything.* "Silly woman!" Nisha exclaimed out loud, sighed and bounded off to the kitchen to clean it up. The rest of the house could wait, but Nisha could not tolerate a messy, dirty kitchen.

That evening, Nisha tried to call Reshma again, all ready to yell at her for being inconsiderate, but again the call went unanswered, and Nisha began to feel worried. *What had happened to her? Why wasn't she answering her phone? Was she in trouble? Had she fallen very sick? Was she in hospital?*

Nisha's imagination was running wild. "Stop!" she rebuked herself. *Her cell phone is probably just out of charge or something. I can yell at her tomorrow, she decided.*

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The next morning, Nisha woke up to the sound of a jarring and persistent doorbell. Her alarm hadn't even gone off. What was going on?

Groggily she grabbed her phone to check the time. It was a few minutes short of half past seven, the time her alarm was due to ring. Even as she pulled on her dressing gown and sleepily sauntered towards the door, the bell rang again. Simultaneously, the alarm on her phone buzzed making her cranky. So it was in a rather grumpy frame of mind that she opened the door.

When she saw that it was Reshma creating the early morning ruckus, she almost exploded with rage, almost... She was about to start shouting, when her eyes were drawn to Reshma's tear stained face, bloodshot eyes and panicked expression. "What happened, Reshma?" She asked, feeling alarmed. "Are your daughters okay?"

"Yes Didi," Reshma mumbled, before dissolving into tears. Her whole body, weighing barely a hundred pounds, shook as she sobbed. "Didi, what am I going to do? They have been beating me, but how can I tell them where it is, when I don't even know. Didi, please help me."

"What? Who beat you? I don't understand. Come in, Reshma. Sit down. I'll make some tea. Tell me what happened." She tried to pull Reshma in by her arm, but Reshma winced and pulled her arm back, as if she had received an electric shock. That's when Nisha's eyes fell on the upper half of Reshma's bare forearms, and she noticed the huge and painful bruises. "Reshma, tell me what's happening?" Nisha demanded.

"Didi, please come with me to the police station. I need your help." Reshma pleaded, wiping away her tears. Nisha realized that she had never seen Reshma without a *bindi* on her forehead and kohl lining her eyes. Even her hair, usually so neatly plaited, was balled up into an untidy bun.

"The police station?" Nisha gulped. "What's going on?" Nisha's desire to help was dampened by her mistrust of the police. She did

not want to get involved with law enforcement, if she could avoid it.

"Please, Didi. The Desai's have told the police that they think I stole two lakh rupees. The police beat me yesterday, demanding that I tell them where I hid the money. But how can I tell them, when I never took it?"

"What? That's insane! You have never stolen anything. What proof did the Desai's give the police?"

"Nothing, Didi. I only cleaned the room where the money was. I promise you, Didi, I did not steal anything." Reshma pinched her neck.

"I believe you Reshma, but what can I do?" Nisha asked, feeling cornered. She really did not want to have to talk to the police. Did Reshma need a character witness, she wondered. Then of course, unpleasant as it would be, she would have to go.

"Please Didi, the police found the thirty thousand rupees I took from you as a loan, in my cupboard when they searched my house. Please come with me to the police station and tell them you gave me the money. They insist that's a part of the stolen money and are threatening to beat me till I tell them where the rest is." Reshma begged, with rising urgency in her tone.

Nisha stared at Reshma in shock. "Of course. Let me get dressed," she finally said, trying to compose herself. Nisha was so appalled by the brutality of the police, she forgot all about her own misgivings.

"Please hurry up, Didi. If I am late, they will beat me again." Tears welled up in Reshma's eyes, again. "Please Didi, I am so scared."

Nisha rushed back to her bathroom, freshened up, slipped on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans, grabbed her wallet and keys and was back in the living room in ten minutes. She had informed her husband Rajesh of the situation, assuring him that she could take care of it by herself. He had asked her to call him if she needed anything. "I'll drive us there," Nisha told Reshma, as she locked the door.

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Nisha had never been to a police station before. She had been to the room where one picks up their passport after the address verification process, but this was different. The look of terror on Reshma's face when she had talked about the policewoman who had questioned her, still haunted Nisha. She had heard of the police beating up the accused to get a confession. As long as the accused was poor and without political or influential connections, she knew it was common practice.

But when Reshma had told her in the car, how the policewoman had beat her palms and arms with a wooden strip and belt, and then forced her to press them down to prevent swelling, so it wouldn't look too bad if a social worker happened to show up, she had felt queasy. It was one thing to read about such incidents in the newspaper. The victims were faceless people. But to see it happen to someone who was a regular part of her life, had made her feel sick and angry.

Nisha had parked her compact car on the street at a short distance from the black barred iron gates of the local police station. Inside, surrounded by a some parked police cars and potted plants, stood a small rundown brick building coated with faded white paint. Next to the main entrance was a flag pole with the Indian flag swaying in a gentle breeze. One officer in uniform was leaning against a police car drinking tea, while another was talking on his cellphone.

Nisha felt apprehensive as she stepped inside with Reshma. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. She looked around the room and noticed two wooden desks littered with papers. Behind the desk opposite the entrance, was a middle-aged policeman with a pockmarked face, and a prominent black mustache, his balding head bent over some papers. The chair behind the other desk to her left, was empty.

Nisha approached the man at the desk, but without even looking up from his papers, he pointed her towards the long bench at the far right end of the room. Reshma did not know the name of the

policewoman who had interrogated her. So Nisha wasn't sure what to ask. "I am here with Reshma. She was called..." Nisha began, tentatively.

"Wait there, Madam." The policeman interrupted in a gruff bored voice, still pointing at the bench. Nisha noted the nameplate on his desk read SUB INSPECTOR ANIL DESHMUKH.

Nisha shrugged, turned right, and walked over to the bench. Reshma followed her. There were two people sitting on the bench, a middle-aged woman in a pale green synthetic *sari* with bleary red eyes and a tear stained face. Next to her, was presumably her son in his late teens in shorts and a torn, muddy, blue cotton shirt. He had a black eye and a host of other injuries. Nisha wondered what they were waiting for.

Nisha and Reshma sat down on the bench beside the mother and son. Just then, there was a clanking rattling sound. Reshma gripped Nisha's arm and shuddered. The sound had come from the unlocking of an iron grill door along the right side of the wall opposite the main entrance. Nisha could see into it from the bench. It barred the opening to a narrow corridor leading away from the room. Nisha peered in and noticed that the corridor was lined with jail cells. It gave her the shivers, when she realized that was probably where Reshma had been beaten the previous day. No wonder the sound of the door made her so jumpy.

As a policeman stepped out, there was some angry shouting from inside. Ignoring the insults, the cop walked over to the pockmarked Deshmukh and said something in a low voice. After that, he walked up to the mother son duo sitting on the bench and escorted them back to Deshmukh. His manner was surprisingly gentle, Nisha noted.

Nisha and Reshma were the only ones left on the bench, and Nisha wondered how long they would have to wait. She couldn't hear the conversation between Deshmukh and the mother and son, but after a while, as the mother and son stood up, they were clearly thanking

Deshmukh and the man actually smiled. Perhaps, the man was human after all, Nisha mused.

Just then, a stout policewoman with a round fair face walked in with a glass of *cutting chai* and sauntered over to the empty desk.

Reshma pointed at her and whispered, "She is the one who has been questioning me."

Nisha nodded and led the way to her desk, as Reshma followed. The nameplate on the desk identified her as Head Constable Amy Cherian. The HC recognized Reshma at a glance, but seemed displeased to see Nisha. "Yes?" she inquired raising her eyebrows at Nisha.

"Hello, I am Nisha Ucchil." Nisha introduced herself. "Reshma here tells me you have some questions about the money I loaned her."

Cherian nodded and called out a name Nisha did not catch. Soon, the policeman who Nisha had earlier seen outside talking on his cell phone, appeared with two plastic chairs and placed them on the side of the table facing the HC. She pointed at the chairs, and Nisha and Reshma sat down. Then Cherian directed a litany of questions at Nisha.

The questions centered around Reshma's reliability, trustworthiness, how long she had worked for Nisha and the money Nisha had loaned her.

At some point during this process, a hefty muscular man barged into the police station hurling abuses at Deshmukh. The two policemen Nisha had seen on the grounds, rushed over to restrain him, but he just punched the one who had been drinking tea earlier, and broke free. Nisha heard the burly man order Deshmukh to release his nephew from custody. He threatened to notify his contact at the Mayor's office, if his nephew was not released right away. For the first time, Deshmukh made eye contact with the man. He checked the number on the smartphone the man was waving at him, against some records on his computer. He sighed, and whispered something to the two constables. The constables escorted the man to the bench

and politely asked him to sit down. They asked him if he would like tea or coffee, and said they would soon make arrangements for him to see his nephew.

With the commotion settling down, Cherian who had been distracted for a while, turned her attention back to Nisha and Reshma. A long and tedious interview followed in which Cherian asked the same questions over and over, using slightly different wording each time. Eventually, Nisha was able to convince Cherian that the money found in Reshma's apartment had been the amount she had given Reshma just a couple of days ago. Cherian showed her a picture of a fridge, and Nisha confirmed that she had given Reshma her old fridge. Even without a shred of proof, Cherian still seemed eager to detain Reshma again.

That's when Nisha intervened. Seeing how things worked at the police station, an idea came to her. "I suppose I'll inform my neighbor that Reshma won't be able to come to work at her place today, either." She sighed. "Poor thing, she is so hassled without her house help. Of course, she did not know Reshma was being beaten by the police. I mean, she relies on her house help, so she can focus on her demanding job at the media company," she had prattled on. "Today, I think she was supposed to interview some social activist lady. But never mind, she can cancel that, I'm sure. The activist lady runs a well known NGO, and is sure to be quite understanding. I mean, my neighbor can't possibly expect Reshma to come to work for her, if she is being beaten in a jail cell, right?" Nisha asked, before standing up to leave.

"We do not beat people, Madam." Cherian asserted, but Nisha noticed the fear in her eyes.

"Sorry, my bad. I saw some bruises, but I am no expert. I will just inform my neighbor about the bruises then." Nisha conceded.

"You know, their husbands often beat them." Cherian confided, nodding significantly.

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"Yes, that's true, though Reshma's husband has been dead for three years, and she lives with her two daughters." Nisha pointed out.

"Oh, I did not know, Madam. Since you vouch for her character, and we have not yet found anything in her house or bank account, we will send her back. Her daughters need her. She will have to come back here to complete some paperwork. So if you can guarantee she will come by in the evening, then she can go back with you now." Cherian sulked.

As Nisha was leaving with Reshma, Cherian called out. "Please make sure she goes to work for your neighbor, Madam."

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Back in the house, Nisha collapsed on the couch. The house was empty. It was almost ten, so Rajesh had left for his office. "Come and sit here, Reshma. We need to talk." Nisha pointed to the squishy padded chair adjacent to the couch.

Reshma hesitated and looked at the floor. "Don't be silly Reshma, just sit down on the chair," Nisha barked. Then she frowned, "Unless you feel more comfortable on the floor," she added in a softer tone. Reshma pulled up a plastic foot stool and sat on it.

"So tell me, what happened with the Desai's? They live in the neighboring society, right?"

"Yes, Didi. I only cleaned where they told me to. Two days ago, on Sunday, Desai Madam said two lakh rupees were missing from her drawer. She said, I was the only servant, who worked in the area where the money was kept. The other lady who works for them is the cook. She only works in the kitchen, and Madam said that she has never seen the rest of the house. The driver, she said, only comes to the living room to drop off stuff. She said I was the only one who had access to the bedroom, so I must have stolen the money."

"Then what happened?"

"I told her I never took the money. I haven't ever opened those drawers. I only dust them from the outside as instructed. She told me that she would give me one day to confess and return the money. If I did not, she said she would call the police. But Didi, how can I return money that I never took?" Reshma paused to take a breath.

"Just one minute, Reshma." Nisha said, as she went into the kitchen.

She returned with a glass of water and handed it to Reshma, who took a few sips before continuing, "Then yesterday, when I went there to work, Madam asked me for the money, and when I told her I did not have it, she told Saab to call the police. Saab is a doctor, and some of the big policemen at the local police station are his patients. The police arrived within fifteen minutes after they called. My first job of the day is in their house at 8:00 in the morning. So I could not go for any of my other jobs."

"What did your other employers say?"

"All my other jobs are in that society, Didi, and the Desais got the society to ban me from the premises. I have lost four jobs at once. None of them are answering my calls. They all think I am a thief. How am I going to manage Didi? I just took a loan from you to pay all the school and tuition fees for my daughters. How will I pay you back now?" Reshma dissolved into tears, and her shoulders shook as she sobbed into her *pallu*."

"Never mind paying off your loan, now. How long have you been working in the other flats?" Nisha asked.

"Two years in one of the flats, and about a year in the rest. I just started working for the Desai's about two months ago."

"Hmm. I guess it's not long enough for any of them to really stick their necks out and vouch for you."

"It's all my fault, Didi. When two of the families I worked for in this society moved away in the last couple of years, I did not try to get jobs here, but in the next society, where the pay is higher. This has

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happened to me, because I became greedy." She lamented, continuing to weep.

"Don't be silly, Reshma. You did nothing wrong. But I think the only way for you to get your jobs back, and for the police to stop harassing you, is to figure out who really stole the money. So tell me, what are these people like?"

"I have no idea, Didi. I don't know much about them. They seem nice enough. They pay fair wages and are polite."

"What is the cook like?"

"It's not her, Didi. I have known her for a long time. She used to work in this society too. She is an honest old lady. Please don't get her in trouble."

"What about guests and visitors? Have you seen any?"

"Yes, Didi. Once, last month, there was a kitty party with about a dozen women. I did some extra work then. I've seen two or three of the women who came for the party, come to the house sometimes."

"Do any of them live in this society?"

"Yes. Your friend from C wing, flat 801. I did some temporary work with her, when her cook had gone to the village last year."

"Ritu Sharma? She is very sweet. I'll ask her what she knows about the Desai family. Maybe, she can convince the Desais that you did not steal. Who else comes to their house?"

"A man sometimes comes on the days Saab works from home, and Madam's nephew sometimes stays for a day or two."

"Her nephew? That's interesting. Where does he live?"

"He lives in a hostel of some college. Sometimes on weekends or other holidays, he comes to stay with Saab and Madam."

"Did he stay with them on any of the days in the week before the theft?"

"He did. He had arrived on Friday. I'm not sure when, but after I had finished my work that day. He was there when I served breakfast on Saturday morning. He was just leaving on Sunday morning, when I entered the house. On Sundays I go there a little late, around 10:30. And just as I finished working on Sunday, Madam asked me about the missing money."

"Why didn't you tell me anything then?"

"Didi, I don't like to gossip about other houses. Also, you have given me Sundays off, so I hadn't come here that day. I was a little scared about their threat, but I sincerely thought they must have misplaced the money, and expected that they would find it soon."

"Okay, you go home and rest today. Call me if the police call you back. I want to be there with you, in case they try to force you to sign a confession or something. In the mean time, let's see what I can find out."

"Thank you, Didi." Reshma smiled for the first time that morning, as she got up to leave.

"Hey, wait. How do they believe you unlocked the drawer?" Nisha called out, as Reshma put on her slippers.

"I heard them tell the police that the drawer wasn't locked." Reshma replied.

"With so much money in it?" Nisha's eyes were wide with surprise.  
"That's crazy!"

Reshma shrugged. She was almost at the door, when she turned back. "Didi, what neighbor were you telling the police lady about? I don't work for Sachi Didi anymore."

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"I know. I never said you worked for her. I just said her house help isn't coming, which is true. I know Padmini, Sachi's current cook, is on vacation for a few days, so Sachi must be having a tough time. And I said Sachi couldn't expect you to come to work, if you were being beaten up in a jail cell. It is all true, isn't it?" Nisha winked, and Reshma goggled at her.

"Thank you," she said, "but I really hope you don't get in trouble with the police. They are horrible." Reshma shuddered.

"Don't worry about me. Now go home." Nisha waved her off. "And call me if you need anything." She added.

## Gossiping with a Friend

As soon as Reshma left, Nisha invited her friend Ritu Sharma for a chat. Nisha liked having Ritu over. She was like a round and cuddly teddy bear oozing gossip.

"Oh my, Ritu. Is that new?" Nisha asked, as Ritu walked in through the door dressed in white trousers and a full-sleeve, pale pink, cotton *kurti* ending a little below her bulging tummy. Her perfect long dark silky hair was pushed back with a broad white hairband, but otherwise unrestrained.

"What, this?" Ritu waved a white leather handbag, a smile plastered on her chubby painted face. The only thing brighter than Ritu's garish makeup was her million dollar smile. Nisha never understood why someone with such a pretty smile would bother using any makeup at all, but to each her own, she had long ago decided, and so she had never asked.

"Yes, that." Nisha looked enviously at it.

"It's an anniversary gift from Suraj. Lovely, isn't it?" Ritu caressed the handbag. "I got it a week ago. It's elegant and still so roomy. It fits everything I need, and it's so soft. I think I am in love with it," she sang.

"Lucky girl." Nisha said, going to the kitchen to boil water for tea. "Raj is never so thoughtful," she grumbled.

Soon, the two women were seated on the sofa in Nisha's living room, munching popcorn and sipping tea as steamy as the gossip they shared.

"Oh right! I forgot she works for you too." Ritu said.

"Yeah, Ritu. I can't believe it's her. She has worked for me for over seven years. I leave my house keys with her when I am out of town. I wouldn't do that, unless I was convinced she was trustworthy."

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"You should be more careful, Nisha." Ritu warned, placing her half empty teacup on the glass topped coffee table. "Now that she has got the taste of stealing, she will do it again. Mark my words." She added in response to Nisha's puzzled expression.

"But why would she do it? Just a few days ago, she asked me for a loan of thirty thousand, and I gave it to her." Nisha asked, before stuffing popcorn into her mouth.

"Maybe she needed more, and knew you wouldn't agree to it." Ritu offered, picking up her teacup again.

Something wasn't right with Ritu, Nisha mused, as she watched Ritu sip her tea. Usually, gossip like this excited her, but today she seemed only mildly interested. "Is something the matter, Ritu dear?" Nisha asked. "You seem preoccupied."

"No, it's just my dad. He is at the hospital, again. I wish I could be with him. But the old hag won't let me go. She has deliberately invited some friends this afternoon, and she insists I stay home to entertain them." Ritu fumed.

Nisha sighed. She was well acquainted with Ritu's mother-in-law's petty cruelties. "So sorry, dear. Forget about the old hag. What's up with your dad?" She squeezed Ritu's hand.

"Ouch." Ritu cried out.

Startled, Nisha withdrew her hand. "What happened?" She asked.

"Nothing. You just touched a sore spot. I hurt my wrist yesterday. Me being clumsy as usual." Ritu mumbled.

"Ritu," Nisha began in a chastising tone.

"Please be careful," Ritu interrupted, mimicking Nisha's tone.

Nisha pressed her lips and narrowed her eyes. Then she took a deep breath and shook her head. "So is your dad okay?" she asked.

"His colon cancer is back." Ritu replied, suddenly looking very tired.

"Oh Ritu, I'm so sorry. Hasn't he been in remission for a while? Three years, right?"

"Yes, but it's back. A few months ago, he showed some symptoms again, and they ran a battery of tests. Finally, it was confirmed that he had a relapse, and it's pretty bad. They did some aggressive chemo, but it's not working very well. Today, they are trying some surgery. It's his last hope." Ritu replied.

"What? Oh my gosh, girl. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I did not want to think about it. It's so depressing. But you know how hopeless a cancer relapse cases can be."

"What did Suraj say about the surgery?" Nisha asked.

"He is away on a business trip for ten days. I found out about it on Thursday. He had already left on Wednesday." Ritu brooded.

"Something this upsetting for you, I'm sure he'd want to know." Nisha persisted.

"No. He's dealing with a difficult client. I don't want to disturb him. Besides, what's the point? What can he or anyone else do? Let's not talk about it. Come on, distract me with something."

"What?" Nisha was confused.

"Talk about something else. Help me take my mind off my dad's illness. I need to think of something else, anything. Come on, distract me." Ritu pleaded.

"Okay, if you insist." Nisha replied, still feeling puzzled. But then she remembered why she had contacted Ritu in the first place, and decided to make the most of the opportunity. "Then help me clear the suspicion on my maid, Reshma." Nisha urged. "I have grown quite fond of her." Now, it was Ritu's turn to look puzzled.

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"How can you do that?" Ritu asked, intrigued.

"By finding the real thief, of course." Nisha explained.

In spite, of her troubles Ritu was amused. She threw her head back and laughed. "Do you fancy yourself Miss Marple, Nisha? You've been reading way too many mystery novels."

"So what if I have?" Nisha was indignant. If she was being honest, she did fancy herself Miss Marple. But it was for a good cause, she rationalized. She'd have to sell it better to Ritu. "You wanted a distraction. Well, what's a better distraction? Come on, be a Watson to my Holmes. It'll be fun." Nisha cajoled.

"Can't you just let the police handle this? If they can't prove Reshma is the culprit, then she will be cleared, won't she?" Ritu conjectured. "Innocent until proven guilty, right?" she asked, draining her teacup.

"Ritu, they tried to beat a confession out of her yesterday." Nisha blurted out, and Ritu gasped. "You can't imagine what it's like to be beaten." Nisha frowned, and Ritu flinched. "I know, I can't, but I saw the bruises, Ritu. How could the police hurt her like that, and all this without a shred of evidence." Nisha's eyes flashed, and her nostrils flared, but she looked at Ritu, and was confused by the weary expression on her face. Although a shade paler than usual, it lacked sympathy.

"They could find nothing in her house, or after auditing her bank account, but they keep calling her back to the police station. They aren't investigating anyone else. Reshma has lost all her jobs in that society, because she is being investigated by the police for a theft in one of the apartments. She won't be able to get another one, until she is cleared beyond all suspicion, and that means finding the real thief." Nisha ploughed on, and Ritu began to look queasy.

"Fine. I'll help, but I don't see what I can do." Ritu scowled.

"You know the family pretty well, right?"

"Priya Desai is a good friend, but I have only exchanged pleasantries with the rest of her family." Ritu said, cautiously.

"Oh, come on. She must talk about her family to you, right?"

"That, she does." Ritu conceded.

"Reshma told me that her nephew comes to stay with her once in a while. What's he like?"

"I don't know much about him, but I believe he began doing his undergrad from St. Xavier's college this year, and he lives in the hostel. He comes and stays with them whenever he can, on weekends or bank holidays, for home cooked meals and to get his laundry done."

"A teen living in a hostel, huh?" Nisha narrowed her eyes, deep in thought. "Does he do drugs?" Nisha asked.

Ritu clicked her tongue. "How should I know?" She shrugged. "But it sounds like stereotyping to me, just like the police assuming it must be the new maid." Ritu objected.

"True. But I am only asking questions, not beating anyone." Nisha retorted. "He could have stolen the money. He was there that morning. Also, isn't it suspicious he left on Sunday morning? I mean, why not stay for lunch? He could have one more home cooked meal."

"Do you really think so?" Ritu frowned, as she sat up straight.

"Why not? If he is into drugs, he could have needed a lot of money. Of course, the other possibility is that Mrs. Desai forgot where she put the money or just misplaced it, and is blaming Reshma. Or maybe," Nisha added, with mounting excitement in her voice, "the money wasn't there at all, and they're just lying about it. Though to what end, I cannot fathom." Nisha said frowning.

"Stop with your runaway imagination. The money was there." Ritu blurted out.

"How do you know?" Nisha asked, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

"I saw it." Ritu replied.

"Oh, how come?" Nisha asked, puzzled. "Was Priya Desai showing off all that money to people? No wonder it was stolen." Nisha rolled her eyes.

"Don't be silly," Ritu snapped, "I just happened to see it." She frowned at her friend's flippancy.

"How come, and when?" Nisha asked, her eyes lighting up. "Come on, spill the details. Why are you being so tight lipped all of a sudden?"

"I was there for a chat on Friday morning. She wanted to show me the cool new smart-watch she had bought for her husband, Abhay's birthday. She had hidden it in her makeup drawer. But she got confused and opened her handkerchief drawer, the drawer below her makeup drawer, first, and that's where I saw the money."

"But, why would she keeps so much money in an unlocked handkerchief drawer? Seems strange. Most people would have kept it in a dedicated cash drawer or something, right?" Nisha prompted, hoping to discover something useful.

"From what gossip I heard once the investigation began," The word gossip seemed to infuse fresh life into Ritu, for she continued with a lot more enthusiasm, "she hardly ever keeps much cash at home, usually, ten thousand tops. So she does not have a locked cash drawer. But on the previous weekend, when they went to Churchgate to catch a movie, Priya and Abhay found a furniture shop with old style, high quality, custom made, teak wood furniture. Abhay's just nuts for that stuff. They wanted to pick up a few pieces, but shop owner is an old man who inherited the business from his dad, and he accepts only cash payments. So they had withdrawn the

money on Thursday, and were planning to revisit the shop on Sunday morning."

"Hmm. Okay, so there was no question of a home cooked lunch for the nephew." Nisha sighed. She was quiet for a moment, before she got excited again. "But if she was going to Churchgate anyway, wouldn't she drop her nephew off at Xavier's? Why make him take the train? Very suspicious. And the money was discovered to be missing soon after he left, you know." Nisha nodded significantly.

"Wow, you make him sound really suspicious, but who are you going to talk to about this?" Ritu's eyes twinkled.

"I don't know. I mean, if the Desais did not usually keep money in the house, how would Reshma know to go poking around for it? It would have to be a huge co-incidence, wouldn't it?"

"True, but then how would the nephew know about it either?" Ritu raised an eyebrow.

Nisha thought for a moment before speaking. "They must have mentioned the furniture shopping trip to him. Possibly, Mrs. Desai even complained about having to go all the way back to Churchgate again, because the old man insisted on cash." Nisha's eyes sparkled.

"Maybe, but I don't see how you can bring him up as a suspect. They would never believe it." Ritu asserted.

"That's it, isn't it?" Nisha scowled. "In our circles, we always assume that thefts are done by the domestic help. It's too embarrassing, no I think too uncomfortable, to consider the possibility that it could be a friend or a relative, and even harder to point a finger at them. In fact, isn't that the only reason they have to suspect Reshma?" she grimaced.

"It's sad, but quite true." Ritu shrugged, and Nisha internally cringed at her friend's hardheartedness.

Perhaps, the emotion made it's way to Nisha's expression, for Ritu added, "What? Don't look at me like that. I don't make the rules. That's just the real world for you. Cruel."

Nisha was startled by the bitterness in Ritu's voice. It was so much at odds with her usually cheerful disposition. *Of course, it's her dad's cancer relapse that has her down. Poor girl, and that hag is only making things worse, the heartless witch. I wish I could do something to help Ritu. She is such a dear,* Nisha mused.

Nisha wanted to give Ritu a hug, but Ritu still had that hard look on her face, so Nisha refrained. "I need a favor," she said, instead. "Can you introduce me to Mrs. Desai? I would at least like to put in a good word for Reshma with her. Please?" she begged, making puppy faces.

"Fine." Ritu agreed. "We can go there together tomorrow around ten. That's when you are free, right? I think it's a good time for her too."

"Perfect." Nisha smiled.

"I have to go back to the hag, now." Ritu brooded as she got up to leave. "I need to get things ready for her guests."

"By the way, do you need any money for your dad's hospital bills? I know the hag won't let you have any. Perhaps I could loan you some, until Suraj is back?"

"No. I'm good. I have some money stashed away. Besides, Suraj will be back in a few days. So I'm okay." Ritu said, her voice shaking a little.

Nisha sighed. Ritu always became awkward talking about money when it involved her parents. Her mother-in-law always made a big deal about any money she spent on them, even birthday gifts. "It's a good thing Suraj is supportive," Nisha mumbled. "I don't know how you manage living with the hag."

"Yeah, well. We all have our problems, don't we?" Ritu smiled, through moist eyes. Nisha gave her a hug. "I'll set up a meeting with Priya for 10:00 tomorrow morning." Ritu called out, as she put on her shoes to leave.

"Hey, would you by any chance know the nephew's name?" Nisha called out from her door, as Ritu headed for the elevator.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact." Ritu's lips curved into a smile. "His name is Sanjay Manjerekar, like the cricketer. That's why I remember it."

## **Tutoring a Teen**

Afternoons were a busy time for Nisha. That's when she conducted tuition classes for college kids. She had once been a math teacher in college, but a few years ago, she had started taking tuition classes at home.

A friend at the housing society begged her to tutor her daughter. Soon, the word spread in the society, about Nisha taking tuition classes in math and science. Before she knew it, she had agreed to tutor half a dozen students. Nisha was starting to find it overwhelming, but she also realized that she was enjoying these one-on-one classes far more than teaching a score of bored faces at once. The tuition classes were quite lucrative, and Nisha figured that she could safely quit her job, get some time to herself, avoid frustrating hours spent commuting through the city, and still enjoy teaching, whilst earning a decent income.

In the afternoons, the dining area in Nisha's apartment was transformed into her workspace. The six-seater glass topped dining table offered plenty of space for her students to spread out their books, pencils, geometry boxes, and laptops, and work comfortably.

All of Nisha's students had morning classes at college, so Nisha enjoyed leisurely mornings sipping tea, gossiping, gardening or experimenting with exotic new recipes for flavorful, low-cholesterol healthy snacks. But from two to five on weekdays, she was busy with tuition classes. She had carefully constructed a schedule for her students, so they could each have a slot with her on days they did not have practicals in college.

On Tuesdays, she taught math to Rohan, a second year junior college student from Xavier's. Nisha wasn't too hopeful, but she thought asking Rohan about Sanjay Manjerekar might be worth a try. As Rohan chewed on the back of his pencil while tackling a problem involving hyperbolas, she asked, "Rohan, would you happen to know a first year degree college student named Sanjay

Manjerekar at Xavier's?" Even as she asked it, she felt silly. Rohan was after all in junior college. Having taught in a college for almost two decades, she knew that the chances of him knowing someone in degree college were quite slim.

So she was surprised to hear him say, "I know him. We worked together on a committee for Malhar. Why do you ask?"

*Malhar*, Nisha thought, and her eyes gleamed. Malhar was the annual Xavier's college festival. If he was in a committee for Malhar preparations, he could be the artsy type, and in Nisha's mind, it was a rather short leap from artsy to drug addict. "What's he like? Is he in a band or something?" She snorted. Then she eyed Rohan, suspiciously. "Are you in a band too?"

Rohan was startled by her fierce expression. "Oh, no. Nothing like that. We were on the technical committee to set up the sound system and stuff. He is from the Physics department, an honor's student in electronics. He's really good with the equipment, and can even do small repairs," Rohan babbled, desperate for Nisha to stop glaring at him.

"Physics department?" Nisha's expression softened. "I had no idea Malhar required a committee with technical expertise, but of course where would these artists be if it were not for scientists? Perhaps, still doing cave drawings with rocks." She sniggered at her own joke, and Rohan heaved a sigh of relief. He ran his fingers through his unkempt wavy hair before returning to his math problem.

For the rest of the class they focused on circles, parabolas and hyperbolas, and Nisha did not mention Sanjay again, until Rohan was about to leave. This time, she was determined not to spook the boy, so she could get some useful information. Just being a science major, although a point in Sanjay's favor, was no guarantee of him not being a drug addict. The engineering colleges were full of kids into drinking and drugs, and if Nisha was being really honest with herself, the science departments too had their fair share of kids doing drugs. It had nothing to do with the choice of major, but just general adolescent stupidity, she grudgingly admitted to herself.

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"Rohan, do you know Sanjay quite well?" Nisha asked, as Rohan tightened the laces on his Adidas shoes. Rohan seemed to be a bit of an Adidas groupie, Nisha observed, noting the logo on his black t-shirt as well.

"Not really, but I have heard the other guys talking about him. He is one of the nerd types, you know, and a teacher's pet too. In fact, someone was just joking about his dedication yesterday." Rohan rolled his eyes.

"Yesterday?" Nisha's ears perked up. "What did they say about him?"

"Nothing much. Just that he gave up a comfortable ride back to college, and a lunch at *The Taj Hotel* with his aunt and uncle, all because a teacher had asked him to meet up about some honor's project. I mean, which normal person prioritizes a physics project over lunch at *The Taj*?" Rohan shook his head in disbelief. "*The Taj!*" he added with emphasis. "But he is such a goody two-shoes." Rohan rolled his eyes as he stood up, after having finished with his laces. His tall lanky frame towered over Nisha.

Nisha sighed. This was not good news for her theory. "Is it really so bad to be a nerd?" Nisha wondered out loud.

Rohan stared down at her, as if she were speaking an alien language. "It'll kill your chances at a social life. Don't you remember what you were like when you were young?" he asked, frustration creeping into his voice.

Nisha smiled as she scratched the back of her neck. "I do, but it was a long time ago. I was a nerd too." She grimaced.

Rohan laughed. "Yeah, I figured, but you are a good teacher, because you grew out of it." He winked.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Nisha asked, glaring at him.

"I mean, your teaching methods are unconventional. You make me think about the topic, and are a sport when I argue. We don't even get to problem solving until after we discuss the topic, and you try to connect it with some real world application that interests me. You don't care just about how I do in exams, but also that I learn and like the subject."

"Oh, I had no idea I was doing all that." Nisha mumbled.

"But is this how your teachers taught you, or even how you used to think as a kid?" Rohan persisted.

"I suppose not." Nisha squinted, as she tried to remember her school and college days.

"Yet, you were always the teacher's pet weren't you? And you thought they were fine teachers, and you did what they asked you to, including learning by rote?" Rohan grinned.

"I was, and I did." Nisha conceded.

"That's what I meant by you grew out of it. You don't just teach the way you were taught. You think about the best way to teach each of us, and it seems like you are excited by every new approach you discover." Rohan's eyes twinkled, and he smiled, pleased that he had figured out something about his teacher.

"And Sanjay is not like that? Is he a proper nerd?" Nisha raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know that. I wasn't comparing the two of you or anything." Rohan blushed, embarrassed by his ebullience. "All I know about Sanjay is, he is polite, respectful and rule abiding. He gets teased a lot for it, but it won't shake him. Well, he gets teased for other things I guess, too." He snickered. "Can you believe he was using a pink flowery handkerchief? He's probably so used to being teased, for him, it's like water off a duck's back."

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"How do you know he was using a pink flowery handkerchief? Does he show it off to the whole collage?" Nisha was astounded.

"No! The guys were talking about it. Every time he returns from his aunt's place, he has a new flowery handkerchief. No idea why. I never asked or cared."

Nisha's eyes widened. "That's interesting," she mumbled, rubbing her chin absentmindedly.

"It is?" Rohan asked, feeling perplexed. "And why are you so interested in Sanjay, anyway?" He watched her intently.

"Someone I care about is in trouble, but I am convinced they are innocent. I am trying to find out everything I can about all the people possibly involved, so I can figure out what actually happened, so I can exonerate this person."

"Way to be vague, lady. Perhaps, you should have been a lawyer, but it looks like you are busy being a detective. Anyway, Sanjay is a good and earnest kid. You'll have to look elsewhere."

"Good compared to you may be," Nisha snorted. "Besides, sometimes people do bad things for a good reason."

"There you go, being all vague and mysterious again. Did you take a drama class in college?"

"Go home now. It's late. Your mother will worry about you." She shooed him away.

"Jeez, I'm not five! Anyway, if you need more information about Sanjay, I'll be happy to help. I know you are up to something interesting. Bye." Rohan winked. He left with a gleam in his eye and a spring in his step. Nisha noticed his backpack too had an Adidas logo on it. She smiled.

## The Police Station, Again

*What do I do now,* Nisha wondered, after Rohan had left. She was at a dead end. She might still suspect Sanjay, but she had nothing on him. Rohan had made Sanjay seem upright and principled. Still, he had said one thing about Sanjay that just might be useful, and Nisha decided not to give up hope yet. Besides, her investigation had only just begun. Miss Marple would never have given up so easily, she chided herself. Just then, the doorbell rang. It was her husband, Rajesh, back home from work, a little earlier than usual.

"Nisha, what happened this morning? Is everything okay? I wanted to call, but it was an exceptionally busy and chaotic morning at the office. I did not get time until late afternoon. I know you keep your ringer off during the tuition classes, but I just wanted to check. When you did not answer, I hoped things were okay. I didn't see any messages from you either."

"I'm fine Raj. You know you'd be inundated with messages and calls, if I was in any kind of trouble."

"I know." Rajesh smiled. "But it's been bugging me, so I came back early, in case you needed any help. So what happened this morning?"

Nisha narrated Reshma's woes and described her visit to the police station. Rajesh grimaced. "Is Reshma okay?" he finally asked.

"I think so." Nisha nodded. "I can't imagine how terrifying it must have been for her."

"You should talk to Sachi, next door, you know. Just in case the police cross check with her." Rajesh suggested.

"Oh my god! I forgot about that. Thanks for reminding me."

Sachi had been their neighbor for about a decade, and used to be a reporter. Now she worked in a management position with a media

conglomerate. It was Sachi who had recommended Reshma to Nisha, when her previous cook had got married and left the city, Nisha recalled. She looked at her watch. Would Sachi be home at 5:30 in the evening, she wondered. No harm in trying, she decided. She rang Sachi's doorbell.

Nisha hadn't entirely lied to the police. Reshma had once looked after Sachi's in-laws, when they were staying with her. At the time, Sachi's father-in-law was recovering from a complicated bypass surgery. With a reporting job, Sachi then had to travel a lot and relied heavily on Reshma to take care of them. When her in-laws returned to their home town in Cochin, Reshma needed a job, and since Nisha was looking for a cook-cum-maid around the same time, Sachi had recommended Reshma.

"Oh hey there, Stranger. You live right across, and I hardly ever see you." Sachi smiled, surprised to see Nisha.

"Hmph, you're the one who is always busy. I'm surprised you actually answered the door. I thought I was going to have to make an appointment through your daughter." Nisha griped.

"Ha ha, so funny, not. I had a light day today. Come in, let's catch up. So what's going on with you? How are the kids?"

"Trupti started her MBA course at Booths in Chicago, and Tanush just got a promotion."

"He is working for Cisco, right?"

"Yeah, I talk to each of them a couple of times a week, which is more than we did, when we all lived under the same roof in their teenage years."

"I suppose distance makes the heart grow fonder, when it comes to parents anyway." Sachi laughed. "That's reassuring. Sonia will be leaving to do her Master's in Singapore in a few months. She's bagged a full scholarship. I'm going to miss having her around."

"Wow! That's awesome. Congratulations to her."

"Thanks. I'll tell her. So how is Reshma doing? I did some pretty good matchmaking there, didn't I?" Sachi liked to tease Nisha by taking the credit for Nisha's smooth functioning household.

"Actually, I am worried about Reshma."

"Why?" Sachi asked, a little alarmed by Nisha's serious expression and hesitation.

Nisha bit her lip. She wondered how Sachi would respond to her little white lies at the police station. Perhaps, she would be angry with Nisha for involving her in such a deceptive manner. It wasn't fair to put her on the spot like that, Nisha thought. But what was done, was done. She might as well bite the bullet and face the music.

"Oh just tell me already. You're making me nervous. What happened?" Sachi demanded.

Nisha poured out the story of everything that happened that morning at the police station. "Sorry I deceived them about you, but could you please back me up if the police call." She added, not daring to meet Sachi's eyes, so she was surprised to hear Sachi giggle.

"You're such a goose, Nisha. Of course, I'll back you up if the police call. I'm happy to help in anyway I can. I know Reshma is completely trustworthy. The police are way too brutal with the poor. I'll tell them that because Padmini is on leave, I had needed Reshma to come, since I knew I could trust her. Come to think of it, I wish I had asked her. The last week would have been far more pleasant." She ruefully eyed the dining table littered with dirty breakfast dishes and sighed.

Just then, Nisha's phone rang. She answered it promptly when she noticed it was Reshma calling. Sachi watched Nisha's expression turn grave as she nodded and finally said, "Of course, I'll be down right away."

"What happened Nisha? Are you okay?" Sachi put a comforting hand on Nisha's shoulder.

"That was Reshma. The police have been harassing her again, asking her to explain where she got the money for her fridge, her microwave and her daughter's laptop. And now they want her back at the station. She asked if I would go with her. She is waiting at the society gate. Sorry, I have to leave."

"Wait a minute, Nisha. I'll come with you." Sachi offered. Nisha nodded.

Five minutes later, Nisha picked Reshma up at the gate and drove to the police station. Reshma was surprised to see Sachi in the car.

"Hello Didi," she said, a little shyly.

"I am so sorry, Reshma. Nisha has told me what happened. I am here to help in any way I can." Sachi squeezed her hand, but Reshma pulled back and winced in pain. That's when Sachi noticed the bruises and gasped. "I'm sorry, Reshma. That was stupid of me."

"Didi, please don't apologize. Thank you for being here. I am so blessed to have both of you helping me out." Reshma's eyes welled up. "Please don't let them beat us anymore. Please." She begged, breaking into uncontrolled sobs.

"Reshma, what happened? Did the police beat you again?" Nisha asked, alarmed.

Reshma tried to steady herself with a few deep breaths. "No Didi, but they threatened to beat my daughters, if I did not tell them where I had hidden the money. They said, they would accuse me of lying, if I told this to you, and you asked them about it."

"That's despicable!" Sachi was furious. "Reshma I am going to call my friend who works for an NGO. She will arrange for you and your daughters to stay somewhere safe for a week, where there will be someone to supervise every time the police come to talk to you.

"Is that okay with you?" Sachi took out her cell phone and began scrolling through her contacts.

"Yes, thank you, Didi." Reshma nodded.

Crawling through peak traffic as the office crowd was returning, the journey to the police station was taking a lot longer than it had in the morning. "What did the police want to know about the appliances?" Nisha asked, trying to gather all the information she needed, to be able to confront the police effectively.

"Didi you told them about the fridge this morning, but they wanted to know how I could afford the secondhand microwave, and they wouldn't believe me when I told them you gave me the fridge for free. They insisted you must have charged me for it, as it was in very good condition. The microwave too is the one you gave me, Didi, when you were renovating your kitchen. They even asked about the laptop you had procured for Sangeeta some time ago, for her college studies." She looked pleadingly at Nisha, as they stopped at a red light. "They said I was in debt because I had bought too many things I could not afford, and I had stolen the money to make the payments. They insisted, that was why they couldn't find the money in my house. They told me to come to the police station and explain how I have so many appliances on my income, and if I couldn't, they said they would keep me in jail."

"Don't worry Reshma. You're not going to jail, again. Not if I can help it." Sachi declared, her eyes flashing with righteous anger. She had just finished talking to her friend from the NGO. "I have arranged for you and your girls to stay at a shelter. Nisha can we drop Reshma off there, after we are done with the police?" Sachi asked.

"Absolutely." Nisha nodded, as she parked the car near the black iron gates of the police station. Reshma trembled, as they got out of the car and headed for the entrance.

Cherian was still at her desk. She frowned when she saw the two women accompanying Reshma this time. "Madams, you must be

busy. You can't keep accompanying her every time some paperwork needs to be done."

"It's no problem. We are happy to. This is my neighbor Sachi Varghese from the media company." Nisha said, pointing at Sachi. "Reshma mentioned that you wanted to know how she could afford certain appliances. Is that true?"

"Yes, Madam. This will take some time, so you should leave."

"That's okay. We need to drive Reshma to her new temporary residence anyway, so we will wait till you are finished." Sachi plonked down on a chair. Nisha nodded and sat down next to her after pulling up a third chair and pushing it towards Reshma, who looked terrified, but reluctantly sat down.

"What temporary residence?" Cherian asked, suspicion creeping into her voice.

"She will be staying at Raksha Bhavan in Goregaon East. There, she will have access to any legal assistance she might need." Sachi began, but Cherian objected saying it wouldn't be necessary.

As Sachi argued with Cherian, Nisha hurriedly scrolled through the hundreds of photographs on her phone. She pulled up a couple of old emails too. When she had everything ready, she looked up. "This has Raksha Bhavan's address and phone number." Sachi finished, handing Cherian a business card.

"Now as for the appliances you were concerned about," Nisha showed her the photographs of a fridge and a microwave, "I gave Reshma these a couple of months ago. I already told you about the fridge when you asked me about it this morning. Here is the picture of mine, and it matches the picture of the fridge you showed me this morning, and here is a picture of my microwave."

"She says you gave them to her for free." Cherian stated. "Is that true?"

"Yes." Nisha replied.

"May I ask why, Madam? The ones she has are in quite good shape. At most a couple of years old. Why would you give them to her? And even if you did, wouldn't you charge her some amount?"

"I remodeled my kitchen, and the contractor gave me a very good deal on new and better appliances, but there was no exchange offer. I knew Reshma needed a fridge, and I needed a way to get rid of mine. I told her she could have my fridge and microwave for free, if she took care of transporting it." Nisha explained.

"What about the laptop in her apartment? Did you give her that too?" Cherian demanded.

"Do you have the serial number of the laptop?" Nisha was feeling annoyed with the badgering, but she kept her cool.

"Yes, we do." Cherian grunted.

Nisha showed her an email on her phone with the laptop serial number on it. "Is it this one?"

Cherian opened a small pad and checked it against her notes. "It looks right," she nodded grudgingly. "How did she get this laptop?"

"I used to work as a professor at a college. I had contacts in several educational outreach groups. One of them started an initiative to make laptops available to deserving college students from poor families. Reshma's daughter Sangeeta had just started a course in accounting, and she was finding it very difficult to manage without her own computer. Cybercafes are great for emails, but inconvenient and expensive for getting work done. She had always made excellent grades, so I encouraged her to apply, and she qualified. She even has a certificate for it. This is the email in which they congratulated her for being eligible for a laptop, along with the serial number of the laptop they had dispatched to her home. She had given my email address, as it was difficult for her to regularly check her own email."

"Do you have any more questions?" Sachi asked.

"Not at the moment, Madam." Cherian conceded.

"Okay, then you know how to contact Reshma if you need her. Thank you officer. Goodnight." Sachi said, and stood up to leave.

When Cherian sulked, but said nothing, Reshma and Nisha followed Sachi. First, they drove to Reshma's little one room home in the chawls, where she packed some clothes. Her daughters were home, and Sachi explained the situation with Raksha Bhavan to them. They nodded, looking relieved. Two visits from the police had unnerved them, and they had been very anxious.

Following Sachi's directions, Nisha drove Reshma and her daughters to Raksha Bhavan, a tidy two-story yellow building located in a small compound . It was getting late, so Nisha waited in the car, while Sachi took them in. She returned soon after having them all settled in. "It's safe for Reshma's daughters to stay there by themselves. The administrative staff of this particular shelter is trustworthy, I promise. It is run by some Catholic sisters. They even make legal counsel available to those who need it. I told Reshma, she can go to work normally, if she feels up to it. Her other employers may not be as understanding as you are." Sachi clarified as they drove back home.

Sachi's forehead creased, and she hesitated before adding, "But the real problem is they can't stay there forever, and the police will start harassing her again as soon as she returns home, perhaps with a vengeance, because she was out of their reach for a while."

Nisha sighed. "The neighboring society has restricted Reshma's access, so she can't go for those jobs anyway. Perhaps, you should let Reshma work for you till Padmini returns. Her work may take her mind off her misery. Besides, she might be in dire need of money, in case she loses some of those jobs. You know Reshma. She will not just accept money. She insists on working for it."

Sachi nodded, blinking away tears. "Yes, just tell her to come and see me tomorrow when she comes to your place."

"As for the other problem," Nisha resumed, "I am planning to talk to Mrs. Desai tomorrow. If I can convince her about Reshma's integrity, perhaps she will withdraw the charges and request the society management committee to let Reshma return to her jobs." Nisha raised her hand and crossed her fingers.

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"It's been such an exhausting day." Nisha said, slumping down on the sofa, as soon as she got home.

"Dinner is ready." Raj called out from the kitchen.

"Really? What are we having?" Nisha asked, perking up.

"The bread guy came by, so I bought a couple of pizza bases and made pizza. I figured neither Reshma, nor you would be up to making any dinner."

"Oh this looks delightful. Thanks so much Raj." Nisha rubbed her hands in glee.

"So what happened this time?" Raj asked biting into a large cheesy, saucy slice loaded with capsicum, onion and mushrooms.

"This is really good Raj. You should make dinner more often." Nisha winked, savoring her first bite.

"No good deed ever goes unpunished, does it?" Raj rolled his eyes.

"Perhaps. I'll tell you tomorrow, after I meet Mrs. Desai. I am going to try to convince her of Reshma's innocence. What could go wrong?" She snorted, and recounted everything that had happened at the police station.

"I'm glad Sachi arranged for Reshma and her daughters to stay at the shelter. It'll be harder for the police to harass her there." Raj nodded,

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as he finished his pizza. "Go to bed Nisha. You've had a rough day. I'll take care of the dishes. Good luck with Mrs. Desai."

## The Other Society

The next morning, at 10:00, Ritu and Nisha were seated on a sofa facing the TV in Priya Desai's spotless living room. She had greeted them warmly, ushered them in, and then excused herself for a moment, while she instructed her cook to bring tea and snacks.

Nisha looked around the room. On one side of the sofa was a large french window opening out into a balcony, with an amazing view of the city from the thirty-sixth floor. On the other side, were a pair of cane rocking chairs with squishy cushions. The room was tastefully furnished, and a few gorgeous seascapes lined the walls. "I love to paint the ocean." Priya explained following Nisha's gaze. She had returned from the kitchen, and was now sitting on the one of the rocking chairs facing the french windows.

"Oh, did you paint them yourself? They're beautiful." Nisha was impressed.

"Thank you." Priya smiled, blushing a little. She was lean and tall, with her mid length wavy hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. She wore a crisp white cotton *salwar kameez* with little blue embroidered flowers, which suited her ivory complexion. Her whole demeanor bespoke efficiency, and Nisha liked her at once. "Ritu said you had something you wanted to discuss with me. How can I help you?" Priya asked.

Nisha hesitated. "Mrs. Desai," she began, as a woman came by and set a tray loaded with steaming cups of tea and a plate of snacks on the intricately carved mahogany coffee table.

Priya waved her hand to interrupt Nisha. "Please call me Priya," she said.

"Yes, Priya." Nisha smiled. "I am Nisha, and I live in the housing society next door. That's how I know Ritu. She lives in the building next to mine. Our two societies, yours and ours, share a lot of

domestic workers. In fact, Reshma, who used to be your maid, has been working for me for over seven years."

Nisha saw Priya's eyebrows wrinkling into a frown, but she pressed on. "Reshma has never so much as stolen a safety pin from my house. She has a key to my apartment, and on several occasions, she has worked in my house when no one was home. I am not in the habit of locking my valuables because I trust her completely, and she has never given me reason to feel any other way. I can understand how she might be the obvious person to suspect, given that she has only worked for you for a few months, but..."

"Wait." Priya interrupted, anger clouding her expression. "Reshma isn't the obvious suspect, she is the only possible suspect. She was the only person besides me and my husband with any physical access to the money. I would not make such an accusation lightly, and I am offended by you lecturing me. I advise you to be careful with your trust." Priya shouted, her nostrils flaring.

"I did not mean to lecture you. I was just trying speak up for the lady who has been my long term, loyal employee. I was upset when I learned that she was severely beaten by the police. She was helpless in their clutches. Her arms were too hurt for her to work yesterday, and she relies on them for her livelihood. Her bruises brought tears to my eyes, and perhaps, I reacted inappropriately. I am sorry to have inconvenienced you. I shall leave now. Thank you for your time." Nisha turned around and walked to the door.

"Super. Keep your unsolicited advice to yourself, and your nose out of other people's lives," Priya hissed.

Ritu was confused, and wondered what to do, but quelling under Priya's glare, she decided to follow Nisha out of the door. Once they were out of Priya's apartment, Ritu turned on Nisha. "She is my friend, Nisha. Did you have to upset her so?" she asked, as she heard the door slam behind her.

"Ritu, what did I say that was so bad?" Nisha was annoyed. "Why was she being so defensive? She may suspect Reshma, but how

could she turn her over to the police, and have her banned from her other jobs?" Nisha complained, as she entered the elevator.

"Come on. She did the proper thing, and what's more, you know it. It's the police you should be angry with, for treating Reshma that way without any evidence. It's not Priya's fault for sharing her suspicions with the police. Also, it's her society's policy to not allow entry to domestic employees who are under police investigation. She had nothing to do with banning Reshma from her other jobs."

"I know," Nisha conceded, "but it's so unjust the way we treat these people. I mean, politicians here shamelessly continue with their jobs, even when they are under investigation by the police for far more heinous crimes." She was about to go on a long rant about politics and caste discrimination, but just then the elevator door opened on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, and a woman stepped in. She smiled at Nisha and Ritu, and they smiled back.

Nisha did not feel comfortable continuing her tirade, so they all stood in the awkward silence so common to elevator rides. Ritu heaved a sigh of relief. Nisha was hoping she could get home soon, for the visit to Priya Desai had been a complete waste. She despaired at the thought that she could think of no way of keeping her promise to Reshma. Her musings were interrupted by the elevator door opening again, this time on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. Another woman entered.

"How dare you come into this lift?" The woman who had entered on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor shouted, so loudly, that Nisha was startled out of her skin. "These ignorant fools won't follow the rules. They are supposed to take the service elevators." She said, by way of explanation to Nisha. "I will send a complaint to the society, and you will not be allowed on the premises for three days. Do it again, and you will be banned from here, permanently. Am I clear?" She reprimanded the woman who had entered on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. The frightened woman struggled to hold back her tears, as she nodded, meekly. "This elevator is not for people like you. It's for the residents." The angry woman chided.

"Oops sorry. We are not residents, either. I did not know we were not allowed here." Nisha blurted out, alarmed that the woman might start shouting at her.

But the woman just threw her head back and laughed. Nisha stared at her, perplexed. "Oh, how silly. You are guests, here. Of course, the elevator is for you too. Only servants, delivery persons and such other riffraff are not allowed. We have allocated the service elevator for them." The woman explained, smiling. "These people need to learn their place. As if it's not enough that we allow the scum to use an elevator, but they want to use the same elevator we use." She shook her head in disbelief. Just then the elevator dinged on the ground floor, allowing Nisha to escape without responding to the lady she now loathed.

Once they were out of Priya's society, and entering the gates of their own society, Ritu caught Nisha's hand. "Calm down Nisha. Some people in that society are like that. Actually, some people everywhere are like that."

"Including your friend Priya." Nisha pointed out, coldly.

"Hey, now who is being judgmental? You were quick to judge Priya's nephew, and you were wrong about him weren't you?" Ritu said, recalling what Nisha had told her about the information she had gathered on Priya's nephew from Rohan, while they were on their way to Priya's house earlier that morning.

"I am not sure about Priya's nephew yet, however it may be possible I was wrong about him. But come on. Look at the way that lady in the elevator was talking to the maid, and the awful things she said about maids in general. It was horrible." Nisha protested.

"I know, but you are judging Priya unfairly. A month ago, someone on Priya's society WhatsApp group was urging people to not call their workers, servants, but to show them some respect and refer to them as domestic help. Do you know what Priya said?"

Nisha narrowed her eyes, and slowly shook her head.

"Priya said, that they could call them whatever they liked, but as long as they forced their 'domestic help'," Ritu used the air quotes, "to take a separate elevator that was rarely cleaned, smelled bad, and often full of discarded items, with little space for anyone to stand, they were not treating the domestic help with respect."

Nisha's mouth fell open. "Priya said that?" She asked, still trying to process what she had heard.

"Yes." Ritu nodded. "She is rattled by the theft. Give her some time to process it all. I'm sure she will make it up to Reshma. And don't make it out that Reshma only got beaten because she is a maid. By the police perhaps, that's true. But women get beaten all the time, even rich women. Plenty of rich women suffer domestic violence. They just keep quiet about it, because no one would believe them, and even if someone did, they'd probably be in big trouble with their rich and powerful husbands." Ritu sounded so gloomy.

"You're right about that. And that's not just limited to developing countries like India, either. Patriarchy seems to be everywhere. The US too has its share of domestic violence. So are you saying that Reshma was treated especially badly, not just for being poor, but also for being a woman? Perhaps you're right." Nisha mulled it over. "And some women are tormented by their mother-in-law too, aren't they?" Nisha asked, putting a comforting arm around Ritu's drooping shoulders. "How thoughtless of me. I forgot to ask. How is your dad doing?"

"I'm going to see him this afternoon." Ritu replied, cheering up. I told the hag I'm meeting a friend, and we are going shopping. I guess I'll have to pick up some crap on my way back, or she'll get suspicious."

"Ritu, you can't let her get away with torturing you like this. Talk to Suraj. How can she behave this way with you? Your dad has cancer for heaven's sake." Nisha sighed, as they reached her building, where they parted ways. Nisha stepped into the elevator of her building, while Ritu walked into the entrance of the next wing.

When Nisha got home, it was lunch time, but she wasn't hungry. She had called Reshma in the morning and asked her to take the day off, and to pay a visit to Sachi in case she had some work for her. So Nisha made herself a cucumber sandwich. She brooded over her visit to the Desai home as she munched on it. It had been a pointless waste of time. She recalled she hadn't even touched the food there. Everything had ended badly, she lamented, as she gabbled a banana. She could think of nothing else, she could do about it. After her sparse lunch, she decided there was no point in brooding. Besides, her student would be arrive in an hour, and she needed to prepare a lesson. Once absorbed in her work, she forgot about everything else.

Nisha spent a pleasant afternoon explaining the structure of the periodic table to a second year degree college physics major, Radhika. Children are taught the periodic table in high schools as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the way it had first been developed, as an efficient cataloguing scheme to organize the elements. But once one studies the structure of atoms using a quantum mechanics, the reason behind the strange shape and structure of the periodic table becomes crystal clear, and it is a beautiful Eureka moment. Nisha loved sharing this with her students, when they started learning atomic physics.

"Wow. That's just so cool!" Radhika exclaimed at the end of the lesson. "I always considered the periodic table to be one of those boring rote learning things one just had to do. In fact, when you started teaching the periodic table last class, I was bracing myself for a really boring lesson. But this makes so much sense. Thanks."

Nisha smiled to herself. It was moments like these, that made teaching such a satisfying occupation, she mused. It elevated her mood, and made her feel more optimistic.

When Radhika left, Nisha was feeling much better. She hadn't figured out what to do to help Reshma yet, but she began looking for a solution. She acknowledged that she could not control how Priya Desai felt, but she could help Reshma get a few more jobs in her own society. She would talk to a few friends and recommend Reshma. Perhaps Sachi too would give her a job and intervene if the

police created more trouble. She would defer Reshma's loan repayment until she had found a few jobs.

With a concrete plan to implement, Nisha felt quite cheerful. She called Reshma and asked her how she was doing. Reshma was happy at the shelter, where a nurse had treated her wounds, and they were much less painful. She told Nisha that she would like to return to work from the next day, and Nisha agreed.

Even though Nisha hadn't been able to figure out who the real thief was, she was happy that things were looking up. So she wasn't as good as Miss Marple, but at least it seemed like Reshma would have her life back on track. So when the doorbell rang, and Nisha opened the door, the last person she expected to see, standing across from her was Priya Desai. But there she was, unmistakable and real, still in her crisp white *salwar kameez* with blue embroidered flowers.  
*What has she come for now, Nisha wondered.*

## A New Friend

"May I come in?" Priya asked, barely meeting Nisha's eyes.

Nisha nodded, bracing herself for angry words or even threats. She ushered Priya to the sofa in her living room and waited for Priya to say something. When Priya sat in silence, wringing her hands, Nisha looked confused. "How can I help you, Priya?" Nisha, finally asked.

"Nisha, I am so sorry for the way I talked to you this morning." Priya blurted out. "It was rude and totally uncalled for. I sincerely apologize. I was feeling defensive. I heard rumors that the police had beaten Reshma, and it really upset me. When you confirmed the rumor, I was angry with myself for acting so rashly. I should have seen it coming." Priya stopped to take a breath.

"When we reported the theft to the police, they asked me if I suspected anyone, and I told them I thought it was Reshma, as she was the only person with physical access to the money," she continued. "I did not realize they would beat her. I should have known. We've read so many reports about police brutality with poor people, but I did not think it through. I am so sorry Nisha." Priya's voice broke, and her eyes turned moist.

Nisha stared at her, open mouthed and lost for words. Slowly, as the meaning of what she had heard began to sink in, Nisha ventured, "So you think it might not be Reshma after all?"

"I don't know what to think. I don't know if she did it. I can't think of anyone else who could have stolen the money. But for the police to have treated her so brutally, without any evidence ..." She sniffed. "I just told them what I thought."

Touched by her heartfelt apology, Nisha walked over to Priya, and gave her a gentle hug. Priya gulped, as a single tear trickled down her cheek. "I am sorry for laying all of this on you, but I had to

apologize for my behavior this morning," Priya said, getting up to leave.

"Please, don't go yet," Nisha urged. "Let me get you a glass of water, at least."

As Priya sipped her water, Nisha saw some hope and pressed on. "Please if you don't mind, I wanted to ask you something. I am sorry to impose on you, at what must be a really stressful time. Still, if it's not too much ..." Nisha implored.

Priya took a deep breath and nodded. "Can I use your bathroom, first?" she asked, and Nisha pointed the way to the powder bathroom adjoining the living room.

When Priya returned from the bathroom, she seemed composed. Nisha was boiling tea leaves, and offered Priya some Marie biscuits.

"Thank you," Priya smiled, biting into a crunchy biscuit. "It's nice that you have a bathroom in the living room. We only have bathrooms attached to each bedroom, and that's an inconvenient layout for parties, or when people come over for tea." Priya sighed. "It's silly I know, but don't like having outsiders in the bedrooms, especially my bedroom. I am very finicky about it. I think these days, they would call me OCD." Priya laughed, as she watched Nisha pour the steaming *masala chai* into cups.

"Is it because you consider it a private space?" Nisha asked, somewhat amused. "One spoon of sugar?" she inquired, unscrewing the lid on the sugar jar.

"Yes please." Priya nodded. "And it's not like that." She blushed. "Growing up, my mother would never let us sit on the bed at home while we were in clothes we had worn outside the house. She considered them unclean for the bed. So I have that drilled into me, and it creeps me out if people sit on my bed in clothes they have worn outside the house." Priya shuddered. "Still, I can't be rude, if people sit. It makes me cringe, and I change the bedspread and sheets, soon after they leave."

"But if you use a bedspread, why does it matter?" Nisha looked puzzled, as she stirred the sugar.

"It's not rational. I can't sleep on the bed, if anyone sits on it in their outside clothes, until I change the bed-linen." Priya shrugged, as Nisha handed her the teacup.

"Oh, I see." Nisha's eyes widened as she brought her own teacup close to lips, but stopped. "That's how you know, no one entered your bedroom, besides Reshma. She goes in to dust and clean, but you know that she won't sit on your bed, so you don't mind." Nisha deduced, and her face lit up.

"Well, yes." Priya smiled. "Wow, you sound like a detective. Next you'll be telling me who stole the money." Her eyes were as round as the Marie biscuit she picked up to dip in her tea.

"I'm no Miss Marple," Nisha laughed, finally sipping her tea. "But how would Reshma know you had money in there? Ritu mentioned you don't usually keep much cash at home."

"I don't usually keep much cash, and of course, no one told Reshma about it. But she was alone in that room for a fair block of time. I thought she might have just opened the drawers out of curiosity and got tempted by the money." Priya offered feebly, as the two women walked to the sofa in the living room. "I know it sounds silly, but no one else goes in there. In fact, my nephew was here this weekend. At the breakfast table, he joked about how he would rather venture alone into a lion's den, than my bedroom." Priya rolled her eyes.

"He is allergic to our cat," she prattled on, "and never carries a hanky. I would take him along to my bedroom to hand him a hanky, but I didn't like him sitting on the bed with his dirty jeans. After telling him several times, I guess I really lost it and yelled at him for sitting on my bed a month ago. Ever since, he has avoided my bedroom like the plague, and even waits outside, while I go get him a hanky." She laughed, as she sat down.

Nisha nodded. The chances of the nephew having taken the money, now seemed negligible. So *who could it be*, Nisha wondered, taking another sip of her tea.

"Who knew about the money being there?" Nisha asked.

"Just my husband and me, of course." Priya replied.

"Are you sure, no one else knew?" Nisha asked, carefully watching Priya's expression as she sipped her tea.

"Of course, I'm sure. Why would anyone else know? It's not exactly a topic of conversation." Priya replied, bewildered.

"I mean, did it come up when you were talking to people about the furniture shop? Perhaps you made a passing comment about their inconvenient old fashioned practices of accepting only cash payments, and how it was annoying that you had to go to the bank to get so much money?" Nisha explained.

"Oh, that way. No, I hadn't talked about that to anyone. I mean, at least not until after the money was stolen. Then, I did mention it to a few people when they asked about how it all happened. I suppose Ritu told you about the furniture shop."

"Oh, by the way, this is a little off topic, but I wanted to ask you something. At some point Ritu mentioned a smart-watch you got for your husband's birthday. My 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary is next month. I was thinking of getting a smart-watch for my husband. Could you text me the details of the watch you bought, you know, brand, price etc."

"Oh sure. Congratulations. 25 is quite a milestone." Priya smiled. "By the way, since you mentioned Ritu and the watch, I just remembered something that might help you understand just how OCD I am about my bed. When I went to get the watch from the bedroom to show it to Ritu, she and I were in mid-conversation, so she followed me right in. I didn't realize what was happening, until we actually walked into the bedroom, but as soon as we were in,

alarm bells went off in my head. All I could think of was, how do I get her out of this room before she sits on my bed. I had just changed the sheets the previous morning, and I really did not want to have to change them again."

"Wow," Nisha blinked, "Is it really that big a deal for you?" Nisha shook her head, puzzled. When Priya nodded, Nisha asked, "So what did you do then?"

Priya shuddered, "I couldn't be rude, you know, and tell her not to sit on the bed. I am kind of embarrassed about this mania. I only told you to explain why I was so sure no one else could have stolen the money." Priya explained, gulping down the last of her tea.

"Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me. But do go on. I am curious as to what happened next. I mean Ritu just loves to plonk down on a bed or comfy chair and chat. It's almost a reflex with her."

"Don't I know it! The number of times I've had to change the sheets because of her." Priya shook her head and sighed.

Nisha burst out laughing trying to picture the situation. "Goodness, I think you should just tell her. It would save you a lot of trouble." Nisha advised, setting her own empty teacup down on the coffee table.

"Perhaps. Anyway, I just rushed over to the chest of drawers and pulled her along to show her the watch. We stood right there admiring it and talking for a while. Then she asked if she could use the bathroom. I was so relieved."

"Umm, why is that?"

"I told her to go right ahead, and that I would go out and get some snacks ready. That way she would have no reason to linger inside."

"Brilliant!" Nisha nodded. "Did it work?"

"Yup!" Priya nodded vigorously. "She came out in a few minutes. Phew, and I didn't have to change the sheets."

Nisha clapped Priya on her back, but she couldn't help shaking her head and smiling. "By the way, how long have you known Ritu?" Nisha asked.

"Since school. But we were in touch only intermittently via phone after I got married. My husband, Abhay, and I had an arranged marriage. At that time, he was finishing his residency in Pune, so I had to move there. Long distance calls weren't as easy then, as they are now. There was no WhatsApp, Skype or even Facebook. Not all of us had internet then, either."

"Yeah, I once mentioned that to a student I tutor, and he asked me if I was around when the dinosaurs walked the earth." Nisha frowned.

Priya laughed. "Anyway, so Abhay had a stable and lucrative practice in Pune. We wanted to move to Mumbai at some point, but the timing never seemed right, you know, with my girls in school and what not."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I just got rid of my youngest last year. I am hoping Raj will be open to some travel now. It would be romantic." Nisha had a distant look in her eyes as she contemplated walking through the cedar and pine forests of the Himalayan foothills. "So how did you end up here then?" She asked, drawn back to the present by the sound of Priya clearing her throat.

"A few years ago, my younger daughter started engineering college and moved into the hostel, so we decided to move here. My husband found a partner to set up a joint practice. By that time, Ritu and I had been in touch for a few years through WhatsApp. I was surprised to discover that she lived close to the place where my husband and his partner had set up their clinic. She told us about this building project nearing completion, right next to her society. We bought a flat in it, and then moved in about a year later, after winding up everything in Pune. What about you? How do you know Ritu?"

"I moved in to this society about a decade ago. She was already living here. I think, she has been here ever since she got married. I met her a few times during evening walks, and we got talking. You know Ritu, she is such a sweetheart. It's impossible not to like her. Suraj and she make a lovely couple, don't they?"

"Indeed, they do. She seems very fond of him. It's a good thing he is so supportive, or I don't know how she would survive that hag of a mother-in-law. That woman really makes me so angry. How can she bear to be so unkind to a dear like Ritu? It's like kicking a puppy."

"Yeah, I don't get it either. Do you know the hag? I mean, were you at Ritu's wedding?"

"No, I was already in Pune, then. She did send an invite, and I really wanted to come, but I was eight months pregnant with my younger daughter, and my older one was two and a half. It was just too difficult. I was really curious to see who Ritu had picked. Theirs was a love marriage, you know. Her parents had wanted her to get married much earlier, around the time I did, but she knew pregnancy could mark the end of her dancing career, so she wanted to put it off both marriage and pregnancy for as long as she could."

"Ritu was a professional dancer?" Nisha was surprised.

"Didn't you know?" Priya responded.

"I knew Ritu liked dancing, but I had no idea she was a pro. I thought it was just a hobby. I must ask her about it. Anyway, a love marriage in those days. That's unusual, isn't it?" Nisha prompted.

"Her parents weren't happy about it. Ritu met Suraj when she performed at a corporate event conducted by Suraj's office, and they hit it off. Ritu's parents were dead set against it, but Ritu was adamant. Perhaps, Suraj's parents did not much like the idea either. I think that's why she and her mother-in-law got off on the wrong foot, and things have always been bad between them. I think things got even worse after Suraj's dad passed away about twelve years ago, and his mom came to live with them."

"Yeah, *saas-bahu* relationships can be complicated, I guess. I love my *saas*, but I am glad I don't have to live with her. If I did, I'm sure we'd end up murdering each other." Nisha laughed.

"My mother-in-law passed away a few years ago," Priya reminisced. "She was good friend to me. I miss her." She gazed into a distance, then suddenly remembering she was in company, she smiled at Nisha. "So Ritu and you have been friends for a decade. That's quite a long time."

"We have known each other for a decade. But while I was working at Jai Hind,"

"Jai Hind?" Priya interrupted, confusion clouding her face.

"Jai Hind college, that's where I used to teach," Nisha explained. "I used to be out most of the day, so we'd hardly ever meet. But in the last few years, I have been taking tuition classes at home for college kids. So I have more time on my hands, and Ritu and I hang out regularly, especially in the mornings when I am free. We spend a lot of time gossiping and teasing each other," she winked, but it reminded her of Ritu mocking her the previous day when she was cautioning her to be careful. "I can't believe how clumsy she is, though. Has she always been like that?"

Priya scrunched up her face. "Not that I remember anything in particular. Actually, she was a very graceful dancer, so I doubt it. Why do you ask?" Priya was intrigued.

Nisha told her about Ritu's many injuries through the years. "A couple of months ago, she had broken her ankle, remember?" she finished.

"Oh yeah," Priya recalled, "It's true. She should be more careful. It has been a while since she used to dance. She quit when she tried IVF,"

"IVF! Whatever do you mean? I thought they never wanted to have kids." Nisha blurted out.

"Yeah, she doesn't like to talk about it. But I remember we were close for a couple of years then, when she was going through the treatments. Perhaps, it was because of them. She really needed someone to talk to. Those hormone injections can really mess with your emotions. I remember she used to call for an hour every week, even though it was long distance. But the IVF did not work. It was a very stressful time for her. When they finally gave up, I think she had to deal with depression. She stopped taking my calls. She's lucky she had Suraj, because it seems like she came out of it. I know she put on a lot of weight during those treatments and gave up on her dance career. Maybe, putting on all that weight all of a sudden made her clumsy?" Priya conjectured.

"Yeah, that makes sense. No wonder she is so defensive about her weight. I'll try to be more sensitive. We've been talking a lot about Ritu, haven't we? I guess it's hard not to talk about a common acquaintance who introduced us. But, I really want to say something about Reshma. I sincerely hope it does not upset you, and I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead." Priya nodded, biting her lips.

"I understand why you suspect her, but I just wanted to tell you, that I know in my heart, it is impossible that she stole from you. I feel that's the least I can do for her."

"But if not her, then who?" Priya asked.

"I don't know. That's the difficulty, isn't it? I am no detective, but I am going to do my best to find out, if I can. So my question is, when was the last time you saw the money, before it disappeared?"

"Oh, that's easy," Priya replied. "On Thursday mid-morning, when I put it in the drawer."

"And you are quite sure you never saw it after that?" Nisha asked, and bit her lips as she waited for an answer.

Priya was silent for a couple of minutes as she thought hard. At one point she frowned, as if something was bothering her, but then she shook her head. "Yes," she finally nodded, firmly. "I'm sure." She said, with conviction in her tone.

"Okay, so have you no idea exactly when the money disappeared, right? It could be anytime between Thursday mid-morning and Sunday morning." Nisha inquired.

"Yes, that's right." Priya agreed. She hesitated before adding, "But if Reshma stole it, then it would have to be on Thursday afternoon."

"Why is that?" Nisha's heart raced.

"Late afternoon on Thursday, that's when I am sure she stole the money. She is by herself for quite sometime in that room on Thursdays, because she gives it a thorough cleaning. She knew she wouldn't be interrupted then, because none of us like to go in during the intense cleaning process. She would have plenty of time to peek into the drawers, especially if she needed money, and I know she did. You can't deny that. Ritu told me you gave her a loan, so you know it. It's quite likely she needed more than she dared to ask you for. I mean she may be honest, but she could be desperate, and she has only worked with me for a little while. So perhaps, she doesn't feel as bad about stealing from me. I did give her a chance to come clean you know, before reporting her." Priya said, eager to justify her actions.

"I see, but couldn't Reshma have stolen the money on Friday or Saturday, or even Sunday morning when she did her regular cleaning work?" Nisha asked, feeling like her investigation could be making some headway.

"No, that's unlikely. Mornings are busy at our house, even Sunday mornings. My husband and I keep walking in and out of that room while she is working. She is barely there for fifteen minutes, just sweeping and swabbing the bedroom and cleaning the attached bathroom. I'm sure she stole it on Thursday when she dusts all the

furniture and walls, cleans the bathroom shelves and fan, and scrubs the jacuzzi tub."

"Hmm.. So if I could prove that Reshma could not have possibly stolen the money on Thursday afternoon, would she be off the hook, and would you be willing to drop the charges against her?" Nisha asked, starting to feel excited."

Priya hesitated, "Would you be able to tell me who did it then?"

"I don't know yet, but then we could explore some possibilities together."

"Fine, if you can prove she did not do it on Thursday, I'll drop the charges against her, because I really don't see how she could have done it on any other day."

"Okay." Nisha smiled.

"Okay?" Priya asked, puzzled. "What is that supposed to mean? Aren't you going to enlighten me about your proof of Reshma not having done it on Thursday?"

"Not yet. Can we meet tomorrow morning at 10:00, perhaps at your place?"

"Sure," Priya nodded, still looking confused. "What's your phone number?" Priya asked, taking out her own phone to punch it in, so she could save it. "Oh my gosh. Is that the time?" Priya jumped, when she unlocked her phone.

"Oh no! Raj will be home soon. I had better get dinner ready. I can't believe we have been gossiping for so long." Nisha stood up, noticing the time on the wall clock. "But it was lovely talking to you, Priya. I'll see you tomorrow at ten. Just give me a missed call right now, so I can save your number too," she added, walking Priya up to the door.

## A Late Night Epiphany

Soon after Priya left, Nisha rushed off to make dinner. There was too little time for anything elaborate, so a simple meal of *khichadi*, *papad* and curd would have to suffice. Just as Nisha fished roasting the last *papad*, the doorbell rang. "Whatever that is, it smells great and I'm famished," Raj declared, as he walked in.

"It's *khichadi* with a dollop of ghee." Nisha told him.

"So that's what smells so good. Yummy. Can't we have it everyday?" Raj made a puppy face.

"And what about your cholesterol?" Nisha frowned.

"Pooh! Gotta go sometime. Might as well enjoy life."

Nisha glared at him, but said nothing. The couple ate their dinner in silence. Raj was savoring his unexpected treat. Nisha had been very strict with his diet, ever since his cholesterol had shot up in his last annual medical check up report.

Nisha was trying to sort through everything she had learned from Priya. She was certain Reshma hadn't done it. But it might not be easy to prove. Would her evidence be sufficiently convincing? She couldn't be sure. And then there was the matter of who actually stole the money. She hoped Rohan would be able to help her. Soon after dinner, she called him.

"So can you get back to me with the information by tomorrow morning?" Raj heard Nisha speaking on the phone.

"What was that about? Who were you talking to?" Raj asked, just as Nisha hung up.

"That was Rohan." Nisha replied.

"Your student? What's going on Nisha?" Raj was intrigued.

## *The Only Suspect*

"He was helping me with my case."

"Your case?" Raj raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I know you want to help Reshma, but it seems like you're having a lot of fun playing detective. Fine, knock yourself out. Keep your secrets. I won't pry."

"That's why I love you so much." Nisha blew him a kiss.

"Just try to stay out of jail, okay, and you know my number if anyone needs to be bailed out." Rajesh winked.

"Must you spoil a sweet moment so?" Nisha scowled.

"I must. It's in our marriage contract. I told you to read the fine print before signing off." Rajesh sniggered, and then gave Nisha a hug to mollify her.

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That night, while getting ready for bed, Nisha shared some of the juicy gossip she had picked up from Priya with Raj. "Can you imagine that Ritu was once a professional dancer? Seems impossible, given how clumsy she is, doesn't it? "

"She's never seemed clumsy to me. Why do you think so? Does she drop a lot of plates and cups when you have tea together?"

"No, I mean she keeps banging into stuff and falling. Wouldn't a dancer have better balance and co-ordination?"

"I guess." Raj shrugged. "But that would explain why she wears so much makeup. Probably, a habit leftover from when she used to perform." He nodded in satisfaction, as if he had solved a puzzle.

"You noticed her makeup." Nisha raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, don't be silly, Nisha. Of course, I did. She wears enough to frighten a clown."

Nisha burst into giggles. "That's true, but I'm surprised you noticed."

"I am a man, but I am not blind. I mean her clothes are so elegant and understated, even a little on the conservative side with all the full sleeves stuff she wears in this climate. It makes her overdone makeup especially jarring. But if she was dancer, I guess it makes sense. Stage people are taught to overdo their makeup, right?"

"I suppose. Wait! Oh my god! No. It just can't be."

"What? Care to explain any of that? Wait, no, let me guess. You have solved the case Miss Marple, and you are going to stage a dramatic ending."

"Solved the case? No. Not quite. But things are starting to make some sense. Thanks Raj." She kissed him, and began pacing the room.

"Sure, Honey. I love being Hastings to your Poirot. But I am tired now. Can I go to bed?"

"Sure Raj. You go ahead, and turn off the lights. I'll join you in a little bit. Goodnight."

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At 8:30 next morning, Rohan called Nisha with the information she had asked for. He had asked Sanjay exactly what Nisha had told him to, and Sanjay had answered his question. But to Rohan's utter surprise, and just as Nisha had predicted, Sanjay had begged to talk to Nisha. Rohan handed him the phone. Nisha talked to him for a while asking him a few questions. Sanjay then returned the phone to Rohan, and Nisha thanked him for his help.

"Are you going to tell me what this is about, lady?" Rohan asked.

"Not yet, because I am still not sure of a few things."

"Of course not! You detective types specialize in being secretive, don't you?"

Next, Nisha called Priya. She was glad she had taken Priya's phone number the previous evening. "I'll come over at 10:00 as I promised, yesterday. But could you please invite Ritu over at 11:00? It's really important. Tell her you want to apologize for overreacting yesterday, but don't tell her I'll be there."

"This is all very mysterious. But it sounds like fun, so I'll play along." Priya agreed.

At 9:30 on Thursday morning, Reshma arrived at Nisha's house. She looked much happier than she had been the last time Nisha had seen her. "Sachi Didi's friend at the shelter has been helping me out a lot. She has made it clear to the police that they are not to question me unless she is with me. Since then, the police have been much nicer. My arms are much better too. Thank you so much, Didi." She beamed at Nisha.

"It's nothing Reshma. What they were doing to you, was horrible. I had to intervene. I'm so glad Sachi was able to find this solution. I don't want to get your hopes up, but I think I might just be able to convince Desai Madam that you are innocent. Then you will be able to safely go back to your own home. I'm going there in a little while."

Reshma goggled at Nisha in awe, but Nisha refused to explain. "Wish me luck," she called out to Reshma, before leaving for her meeting with Priya.

## Missing Puzzle Pieces

At 10:00 am sharp, Nisha rang Priya's doorbell. She entered the living room to find the coffee table laden with steaming cups of tea, biscuits and some chocolate cake. "I had to make up for my rudeness last time," Priya explained. "So tell me your brilliant theory, while you help yourself to some chocolate cake."

"Okay, let me dive right in." Nisha said, taking a sip of the hot tea. "Tell me, was the stolen money kept in your handkerchief drawer, right below your makeup drawer, where you kept the smart-watch you bought as a surprise gift for your husband's birthday?"

Priya goggled at Nisha in silence. "You are a witch," she whispered, when she finally found her voice. "I never told you anything about a handkerchief drawer, let alone the fact that it is below my makeup drawer. Did I? I'm sure I didn't. How did you know?"

"That's easy. Ritu told me. She noticed the money in your handkerchief drawer when you took her in to show her the smart-watch."

"Did I show her the handkerchief drawer? Why would I do that? The smart-watch was in the drawer above it."

"Yes, I know, but I am guessing you were really distracted, because you were freaked out about the possibility of Ritu sitting on your bed. You weren't really paying attention. While talking to Ritu, I had raised the possibility of you not having actually withdrawn the money at all, and she told me to eliminate it, because she had seen the money. She said, you accidentally opened the drawer below the makeup drawer, and she had noticed the money."

"Oh, I see. Okay, go on."

"So you see, Reshma could not have stolen it on Thursday late afternoon, because Ritu saw it on Friday morning."

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"Hmm, but then who..."

"Another person also opened that drawer before you did on Sunday morning." Nisha interrupted.

"Who?" Priya asked, wondering if her bedroom had somehow become a thoroughfare without her realizing it.

"Your nephew opened it on Saturday, early morning, when your husband and you were out on a morning walk."

"That's crazy. Why would he? Didn't I tell you that he was terrified of going into my room? Besides, how could you possibly know my husband and I went for a morning walk on Saturday? You are a witch!"

"Don't be silly. I am not a witch. Your nephew told me all of this."

"My nephew? You're totally wigging me out. Why on earth would he tell you anything at all?"

"Your nephew Sanjay, and my student Rohan, are both in Xavier's, and they know each other." Nisha nodded, significantly.

Priya stared at Nisha, speechless, so Nisha continued. "You see, Rohan and Sanjay were on a Malhar committee together. Rohan told me that some common friends were teasing Sanjay for the flowery pink handkerchief he was using on Sunday. Apparently, it is a standing joke that he uses a girly hanky every time he returns from here. You told me you give him a hanky every time he visits, because he is allergic to your cat."

"Ah, but Miss Clever, I did not give him one this time. And do you know why?"

"Yes, I know. It was because you saw him use a tissue at the breakfast table." Nisha said, impatience creeping into her voice.

"How? What? How?" Priya goggled at her again.

"You told me you hadn't opened that drawer after putting the money in, right up until Sunday morning, when you found it missing. I know you did not remember accidentally opening it in front of Ritu, but you would remember opening it for your nephew. That's why you hesitated when I asked about it. You were wondering how come you hadn't given him a hanky this time." Nisha explained.

"Are you a mind reader?" Priya asked, beginning to look terrified.

"No, merely good at organizing available information into a coherent story. After talking to you last night, I had a feeling your nephew had taken a handkerchief from your drawer sometime on Saturday morning, because his allergies were really bothering him. From what Rohan had told me, I knew he was using one in college on Sunday and I seriously doubted it was one of the hankies you gave him earlier. He probably didn't realize how angry you would be, until he had already taken the hanky. He couldn't put the dirty hanky back in the drawer, so he decided to keep the hanky, but hide it from you. At the breakfast table, he was nervous about it, and that's why he made the feeble joke about it being safer to venture into a lion's den than to go into your bedroom. "

"Oh, okay. So are you saying he took the money? He is a good boy. I know college kids do stupid risky stuff, but Sanjay is not like that. He would never ..." Priya was overwhelmed by the information overload.

"I asked Rohan to ask Sanjay if he had got the flowery pink handkerchief from the chest of drawers in your bedroom." Nisha continued, when Priya seemed lost for words. "Sanjay was so worried I would rat him out to you, he asked Rohan for a chance to talk to me. I confronted him with my theory, and he confirmed everything I had guessed. He told me, he took the handkerchief when you and your husband were out on a morning walk. Normally, he would have asked you for it, but you were not home, and he was desperate. In fact, he was so desperate, he did not realize what he was doing, until after he had already done it. You see, his allergies were worse than usual that night, because your cat had sneaked into the room he sleeps in and spent the night there. Later, he got a tissue

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from the kitchen and hid the handkerchief, so you wouldn't get mad at him him."

"I know this makes him look bad. But he did not steal the money. Why would he?"

"Gambling, drinking, drugs, motorbikes, cool electronics, impressing girls, who knows what silly stuff teens need money for."

"I tell you, he is not like that. He does not have any issues with peer pressure. Did he say he stole the money?" Priya asked, preparing herself for the worst.

"Well, he did say something interesting."

"What?" Priya asked, her heart racing.

"Relax. I know he did not steal the money, because he was in no frame of mind to do so. His allergies were driving him crazy. Besides, he really is a good boy."

"You evil cruel woman!" Priya shouted. "How could you do this to me?"

"Sorry. I needed to be sure, and studying your reaction helped me eliminate any doubts."

Priya stared at her aghast. "But he did say something interesting, you know." Nisha reminded her.

"What's that?" Priya asked, almost at the edge of her seat. "And don't you dare play anymore games with me."

"He said that there was no money in the drawer when he took the handkerchief out. Two lakhs is a lot. He would have noticed it, if it was there."

"You believe he didn't take it, don't you?" Priya looked pleadingly at Nisha.

"Of course, I do. I told you that, already. But that tells us that the money was stolen sometime between Friday late morning, when Ritu saw it, and Saturday early morning, when your nephew opened the drawer." Nisha paused for effect, and then added, "That puts Reshma in the clear. Reshma was not in your house for even a moment in that period, right?"

"Right. I'll drop the charges and inform the society. But who could it be then? It can't have disappeared by magic. You're not going to leave this story on a cliffhanger, are you?"

"I'm not sure. That's why, there are two things I need to ask you."

"Go ahead." Priya nodded.

"First. Did Ritu always overdo her makeup? I mean, when she was in school and college?"

"Why are we talking about Ritu's makeup now? Talk about a non-sequitur. Is this really the time to gossip? Nisha, focus." Priya urged.

"I am focused, Priya. Trust me. Now, please. Just tell me." Nisha pressed on.

"Fine. No. She was quite good at applying it. She only did garish makeup for stage performances. I've wondered about it too. I never asked her, because it sounds rude. Also, I guessed, maybe, she misses being on stage."

"Maybe. Okay, second question. Did Ritu bring her new handbag to the bedroom when you were showing her the smart-watch?"

"First Ritu's makeup, and now her handbag? Aren't we veering off topic?" Priya asked, but seeing Nisha's impatient expression she continued, "Yes, she did. She was showing me the handbag. She was so thrilled about it being a gift from Suraj. That's what reminded me about the gift I got for my husband. I went in to get it out, but as you know, she followed me right in. She was trying to show me how spacious the bag was when I had got up to get the smart-watch, so

she brought it along with her to show me. I remember cringing about that too. I did not want her to leave it on my bed. But fortunately, she kept it on her shoulder all along. She loves that bag. But for the love of God, can we please get to the matter at hand now?"

"Okay, now think really carefully. Was there anyone besides your husband and you, who ventured into that room on Friday, after Ritu left."

"Who else could be there?"

"Think carefully. Did anyone use the bathroom attached to your bedroom? Perhaps, the person from your husband's office who visits sometimes, or the lady who comes in the evening to make *rotis*, or your nephew, some repair guy, an electrician, a plumber, or anyone else. Think very carefully. This is very important. I need to know for sure."

Priya sat quietly with her eyebrows scrunched and her chin propped up by her hand thinking very hard. "No. There was no one. I am sure." Priya said with conviction, a full two minutes later.

Nisha nodded and sighed. "Well, then the solution is obvious, isn't it?"

"Obvious? Will you stop talking in riddles, already?" Priya barked, unable to contain her frustration.

"When we have eliminated the impossible, whatever we are left with, however improbable, must be the solution." Nisha clarified.

"But we are left with no one. No one went into the room after Ritu left. I am sure," Priya said. "I tell you, I'm sure," she repeated.

"So, Ritu could have been the only person who took your money. Therefore it must be her. She saw it last. She had a handbag large enough to easily stash away a large sum of money without it bulging. She could easily leave the building without anyone

checking her, unlike the maids who are randomly frisked and have their bags checked by the security at the gate. And then of course, no one would suspect her." Nisha said, checking off each point on a finger.

"Exactly, and why would no one suspect her?" Priya was shaking her head in annoyance.

"Because no one would be able to pin a motive on her." Nisha answered, as cool as a cucumber.

"So you see, your entire theory is built on an untenable foundation. Come on Nisha, you can't really think it's our friend Ritu."

Disappointment washed over Priya. She was irritated with herself for being carried away into believing that Nisha could actually solve the mystery.

Nisha put her fingertips together and took a deep breath. "You know, I was just as stymied as you are for her motive, until what you told me about her makeup today. But now I think I know her motive."

"Her makeup? Are you saying this woman is not really Ritu, but someone disguised as her?" Priya asked, trying to make sense of Nisha's incomprehensible statements.

It was Nisha's turn to look stunned. "What, no! How could you even think of something so bizarre?"

"You think I'm the one saying bizarre stuff?" She gaped at Nisha in disbelief. "Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Then what according to you is Ritu's motive?" Just then the doorbell rang.

"Why don't we let her tell us?" Nisha suggested, gesturing towards the door. "Remember, I asked you to invite her here at 11:00." She added, when Priya looked dazed as she walked towards the door.

Just as Priya was about to open the door, Nisha stopped her. "I am going to say something strange and unexpected." Nisha whispered.

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"As opposed to all the sane and predictable stuff you have been saying up until now?" Priya raised her eyebrows.

"Please Priya, just play along, and don't raise any objections, even to what may seem like blatant lies. I promise everything will become crystal clear in half an hour. If not, then you can set everything straight, but just give me a chance to do what I need to do, and play along for the moment." Nisha pleaded.

Priya frowned and bit her lips. "Fine," she sighed with a shrug. "Thirty minutes. I am looking at my watch," she muttered. Then she opened the door and ushered Ritu in.

"Thanks," Nisha mouthed, soundlessly, pressing Priya's hand while Ritu was took off her shoes.

## The Motive Force

Once they were all in the living room, Priya signaled her cook to bring in some cold *lassi* for everyone. "I see you two have made nice." Ritu beamed. "It's nice to see my two good friends getting along."

"I managed to prove to Priya that Reshma couldn't possibly have stolen the money." Nisha said.

"How did you do that?" Ritu asked, intrigued.

"I'll tell you in a minute. But that gives rise to a new problem. Who actually stole the money?" Nisha chewed on her lips. Ritu shrugged, and Priya's ears perked up.

"It brings me back to my original conclusion. There was no money to steal." Nisha said savoring the stunned silence. "Priya just made that up." She added pointing an accusing finger at Priya. "After all, no one besides Priya has seen this money now, have they? Not even her nephew."

"What?" Priya snarled at Nisha. "Ritu, how dare you bring this woman to my house? All she does is insult me. Did you put her up to this? This was your idea wasn't it, Ritu? I bet it was. What possible reason would this complete stranger have to constantly insult me? I know you have something to do with this absurdity Ritu, and to think I considered you a friend." Priya caught Ritu by her shoulders and shook her.

"No, n...n...nooo," Ritu stammered, baffled. "Nisha, what are you saying?" She looked pleadingly into Nisha's eyes, wondering if her friend had gone mad. "Remember when you proposed this theory earlier, I told you it was impossible, because I had seen the money." When she saw no sympathy there, she turned to look at Priya. "I swear Priya, I told her, that I saw the money. I told her that when

you were showing me the smart-watch, you accidentally opened the drawer below, and I saw the money. I swear, I told her that."

"Oh, oops. Yeah, now I remember." Nisha blushed.

Ritu goggled at her in disbelief. "Nisha, how could you do this to me?"

"I'm so sorry Ritu," Nisha sighed, "but I needed you to admit that to someone other than me."

"Why wouldn't I Nisha? I told you this right at the beginning."

"Well, you see, knowing what you have told us, only you could have stolen the money." Nisha announced.

"What? This is another joke, right? Like you blaming Priya? Didn't know you had a flair for drama, Nisha." Ritu jeered, but Nisha's expression was grave. "What?" Ritu asked looking alarmed. "You don't really believe I took the money, do you? Priya, tell her I never would. Why would I? I have no shortage of money."

"Ritu, I know you are a wonderful person, but I also know that circumstances drove you to steal the money." Nisha asserted.

"What circumstances? You're crazy, Nisha. Priya, tell her she is crazy."

"Hey, she is your friend. You handle her. I told you she's nuts from the beginning. But I would like to hear her theory. So what bizarre reason have you come up with for Ritu stealing the money?" she asked, looking expectantly at Nisha, when the cook arrived with a tray loaded with three glasses of refreshingly cold *lassi*.

The three women avoided each others gaze, as they each picked up a glass and thanked the cook. Getting the sense that she had barged into an awkward moment, the cook hurriedly left after placing the empty tray on the mahogany coffee table. She had already cleared

out the empty coffee cups and plates sometime earlier, while Nisha and Priya had been engrossed in their conversation.

"Ritu, why do you wear such garish makeup?" Nisha asked, taking a sip of the cold tart *lassi*.

Ritu looked like she had seen a ghost. Whatever she had expected Nisha to say, it was not this, and while Ritu tried to collect herself and look amused, Nisha knew she had hit home. "It's Suraj, isn't it?" Nisha persisted. "He hasn't been very nice since the IVF treatments failed. Not that he was great before, but things got a lot worse after, didn't they?" Nisha drilled on.

A tear trickled down Ritu's cheek. "Who told you about the IVF treatments?" She glared at Priya who blushed, but was also too confused to say anything.

Ritu stared at Priya and Nisha for almost a minute, before she broke the silence. "We had a love marriage, and I went against my family for him. I trusted him. He seemed so sensitive and thoughtful, always planning wonderful birthday surprises and outings. I couldn't imagine a nicer man.

My parents did not like that he came from a far richer family than ours. They wanted me to break it off, but I was stubborn. I refused, and Suraj and I got married." It was as if a dam had broken, and Ritu could not stop speaking. Tears gushed down her cheeks washing off her makeup. Priya gasped at the first sight of an ugly bruise surfacing beneath the cover of rouge and foundation.

Nisha longed to give Ritu a hug, but she knew better than to interrupt her now. Ritu needed to get this all off her chest. "The first year was fine, but soon things began to change. He has a temper, and slowly his true nature asserted itself. I still remember the first time he hit me. It was because I had bought my father an expensive birthday gift. He said my father did not deserve it, because he disapproved of our marriage, and we shouldn't spend our resources on him. I felt guilty about my parents opposing our marriage, and I did not say anything. That was big a mistake. Because this pattern

continued. After that, if ever I spent any money on my parents, I would do it secretly from my own earnings. If he found out, he would get violent." As her tears ebbed, the bitterness in her voice intensified.

Ritu droned on tonelessly. "I did not want to say anything to my parents. They were angry with me for marrying Suraj, and would have told me I deserved this for opposing them. I hoped the situation would get better once we had kids, but I couldn't conceive. In desperation, I suggested IVF, and that cheered Suraj up, but wrecked my dancing career. The IVF did not work, and I had become even more dependent on him, and he knew how to exploit it. He often reminded me how fat and ugly I had become to destroy what little was left of my confidence. Then the marital rape began." Ritu said it in such a matter-of-fact tone, it was chilling.

"My dad is dying." Ritu said, succumbing to a fresh wave of tears. "My brother called on Thursday to tell me about it. He was quite snide, when he pointed that I had been a complete disappointment to them. My parents were hard up on money with my dad's prolonged cancer treatment, and he reminded me, that in spite of living in riches, I had barely contributed to their medical expenses. He has no idea how much the little had cost me." Ritu sobbed. "You remember my broken ankle from a few months ago."

"Why didn't you ever say anything Ritu?" Priya cried out in anguish.

"To what end? What could you do? And if Suraj ever found out, I said something..." She shuddered at the thought, and Nisha even though she had guessed the truth, was appalled by the extent of Suraj's cruelty and duplicity. She felt shivers down her spine.

"On Friday, when I saw that money Priya, sorry..." Ritu sobbed so hard, her whole body convulsed. "I had spent the whole night awake wondering how I would get some money for my dad. I had to give him something. I couldn't let him die hating me for being a heartless selfish bitch. When I came out of the bathroom, you were gone, Priya. It was so easy. I had the big handbag. I just stuffed the wad of

notes into it and walked out. No one noticed, and later when it came up, who would suspect the rich man's wife of stealing, right?"

"Sush." Priya kept repeating, holding her friend in a tight embrace, while she sobbed. "I told you the world was cruel, didn't I?" Ritu looked at Nisha.

"Yes." Nisha assented. "You did." She gave Ritu's hand a tight squeeze, but was careful not to touch the bruise on her wrist.

"So now what?" Ritu asked. "I can't get the money back. My parents have already spent it. I'm okay with going to jail too. I mean, I'm pretty much imprisoned and beaten in my own home. How much worse can jail be? At least, I won't have to pretend to adore my jailers." She said, resigned to whatever ugly fate awaited her.

"Now nothing." Priya said. "Now nothing, as far as the money is concerned. I'll sort it out with Abhay. You don't have to worry about it." Then she looked at Nisha. "You must think I am horrible for pushing so hard when I thought it was Reshma, but letting it go for a seemingly rich friend."

"It did cross my mind, and I would have thought ill of you sometime ago. But now that I know you better, I think I understand you." Nisha sighed.

"You do?" Priya asked, confused.

"Yes, I do. For one, you have known Ritu for almost all her life, and you know her well, and you know she is not in the habit of stealing. You could not have drawn the same conclusion about Reshma, having known her for so little time. Also, Ritu isn't your employee, she is your friend, and we all treat friends differently. Our responsibilities to friends differ from those to our employees. Additionally, you feel guilty, as do I, for never realizing Ritu was enduring so much suffering. It's our responsibility as friends to be there for her and make her feel comfortable enough to confide in us, her deepest troubles. We failed her."

"Yes, I guess it is something like that. But I need to learn empathy for those who work for me. You were able to feel for Reshma."

"Don't beat yourself up. Reshma has worked with me for a long time. I am sure you develop bonds with your longtime employees too."

All this time, Ritu sat staring blankly at the wall in front of her through her tear stained face. Nisha approached her. "Ritu, I am so sorry." She gently and slowly put her arm around Ritu's shoulders. "Please tell us, what can we do?"

"What can you do? My parents are right. I made a bad choice, and I have to live with the consequences. But do tell me, Nisha how did you figure it out after so long? How did you figure out my husband was abusing me?" Ritu shouted. "Only because it helped you solve a puzzle, right?" she accused.

"No, Ritu. I never knew you before Suraj started abusing you. And you did your best to hide it. I cannot fathom how you managed to be so cheerful in your situation, but it completely threw me off. Only when Priya told me what you were like before you got married, did I begin to understand what might have happened. She told me you used to wear subtle makeup, and that far from being clumsy, you were an accomplished and graceful dancer. Priya also did not know anymore about Suraj than I did, and that's only stuff you told us and when I thought about it, I realized that it was really nothing at all. I realized all the good things about Suraj boiled down to him buying you gifts a bit of PDA. You never mentioned anything about time you spent together, cute anecdotes from your day to day lives and stuff like that. Also, something you said about domestic abuse in our socioeconomic class yesterday, suddenly fell into place."

"And Ritu please, none of this is your fault," Priya said, kneeling in front of her, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You can't take the blame for Suraj's actions. So what if you did not see it coming? None of us knew what he was doing to you, either. And your dad's reasons for opposing you marrying Suraj were stupid. Instead, your parents should have got to know Suraj as a person, to help you

decide if he was good for you. But they abandoned you when you needed them most."

"Don't you dare say that." Ritu's eyes flashed. "My parents are good people. They tried to warn me. I never told them what Suraj did to me, and they assumed all my rudeness and indifference towards them, were my own feelings and not something I was forced into. I can't imagine what horrible things they think of me, but I deserve them all. I am a coward."

"What about your mother-in-law? Does she know what Suraj does to you?" Nisha asked.

"Not explicitly, but she has some idea, and pretends not to know. Publicly it's easier for me to say hateful things about her than Suraj, and that's how I vent my frustrations. But she does shoulder some of the blame for how she raised him, doesn't she? She never shows me the slightest bit of kindness either, and often goes out of her way to make things harder."

"Ritu, why don't you think about this for a few days. Things can't go on like this, girl. You have years ahead, and you can't spend them in such misery." Nisha pointed out.

"What choice do I have? I have no job or money. My family has practically disowned me. I have no support system. Suraj knows that, and he gets more cruel everyday. Frankly, jail sounds peachy."

"I am not going to report you!" Priya declared.

"You need to decide what you want, Ritu," Nisha insisted. "You need to figure out how best to reinvent yourself. We are here to help you do that. As for money, if you file for divorce, after so many years of marriage, you are entitled to alimony from Suraj. If you need a support group who understands you better, my neighbor Sachi can help you find one. She can even hook you up with a good divorce lawyer. If you don't want a divorce, you could try to convince Suraj to get therapy and the two of you could try couples

therapy. Please, Ritu, think about it, and tell us what we can do to help."

"Nisha you are always the efficient practical one, aren't you? But just because there is a solution, does not mean that I have the courage to avail of it. I told you, I am a coward. I was even willing to throw Reshma under the bus to save myself."

"True, and that's where your less cerebral, and more emotional friends come in. Ritu you are a wonderful person, and don't you dare call yourself a coward. Courage comes in many forms. Through your unimaginably painful ordeal, not only have you found a way to stay cheerful, you have always spread cheer among your friends. That takes strength far beyond what most people have. All you need is a little support, someone to have you back, and I have no doubt you will be able to reshape your life. Like Nisha said, we are here to help you through it all. That's a promise."

## Epilogue

With Sachi's help, Ritu successfully filed for divorce and obtained a modest alimony. She got a small one room kitchen apartment for herself in a less posh part of town, but kept in touch with her old friends, who were unwavering in their support.

After a year of working hard at learning Capoeira and self defense techniques, she regained her confidence. Living in freedom, she even managed to lose a lot of her excess weight, which was mainly a side-effect of depression. She began teaching dance and Capoeira to kids and young teens, which earned her a modest income. As she taught, she also continued to take advanced classes in Capoeira to improve her own skills.

Against Priya's vociferous objections, she began paying back the two lakhs in small installments. She also reconnected with her brother and was especially thrilled to get to know her two teenage nieces. She taught a weekly class in self defense at the women's shelter where she had lived for a while, before she had felt confident enough to live on her own.

Reshma was cleared of all charges, and got all her old jobs back. Priya apologized to her for jumping to unfair conclusions. Even Cherian mumbled an apology when the matter was cleared up at the police station.

Nisha continued teaching college kids, but Rohan was full of admiration for her detective skills. Nisha was pretty chuffed about solving a real life mystery, and bought another dozen detective stories to read. But not on Friday mornings, because that was when Nisha, Priya and Ritu got together to hang out, chat, confide their troubles in each other and celebrate their successes.

Rohan was so impressed by Nisha, he hung on her every word, even when she taught him math, but he secretly hoped and prayed that he

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would be have another chance to help her solve a mystery, and he often reminded her that she owed her success all to him.

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