

Prey on The Prowl



Prey on the Prowl

(A crime Novel)

BS Murthy

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Dedicated to those women whose loving glances have made my life's journey a joyous sojourn

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Prey on the Prowl

That June evening, the crimson sun gave in to the dark monsoon clouds to let them end its long summer reign over the Deccan skies. What with the thickening clouds thundering in triumph, Dhruva woke up from his siesta, and by the time he moved into the portico of his palatial bungalow at 9, Castle Hills, the skies had opened up to shower its sprawling lawns. It was as if the eagerness of the rainfall matched the longing of the parched soil to receive its fertile mate in an aroma of embrace, and in the ensuing echoes of that seasonal union, the roots of the garden plants devoured every raindrop, that is, even as their leaves shed the overburden to accommodate the new arrivals.

Dhruva, impelled by all that, stood engrossed, and Raju, the housekeeper, fetched him a plateful of hot *pakodas*, which, facing the spatter, he began to savour, and before he had finished with the snack, Raju returned with a mug of steaming Darjeeling tea for him. Soon, the refreshed sun resurged to warm up the leaves, even as the satiated roots let the bounty go down the drain. Done with the beverage, Dhruva picked up the sachet of *lanka pogaku*, to roll a cigar, and finishing that as he reached for the cigar lighter, the rainbow, in its resplendent colors, unfolded in the misty skies. However, when he began puffing away at the cigar, as if dispelled by its strong scent, the dissipated clouds began disappearing from the horizon.

Watched by Dicey, the Alsatian, Dhruva savored the cigar to the last puff, but as he stubbed the butt, and stepped out onto the lush green lawn, the pet followed him to leave its footprints on the damp canvas in its master's tracks. Even as the clouds began regrouping in the skies, he covered the garden to caress every croton and coleus as he would Dicey. But when it portended downpour, Raju led Dicey into the portico and Dhruva headed towards the study to pick up the half-read *Crimes Digest* of the month. However, as it rained again, he reached the first-floor French window, standing by which he thought that it was akin to the urge of the assassin to revisit the scene of the crime, for a review of the same. Amused by his analogy, he thought as if the rain was obliterating its earlier footprints, but when it ceased raining and the skies turned murky, seemingly mourning the loss of their resplendence, he too immersed himself in the dark world of crime the *Digest* pictured.

Meanwhile, Raju let Dicey do the patrolling, and soon it began barking at the gate inducing Dhruva to reach to the window, through which he saw a sensuous woman, tentative at the half-open Iron Gate of his mansion. Enamoured of her attractive face and desirous of her middle-aged frame, as he stood rooted, the pet sprang up to the gate, forcing the tantalizing trespasser to beat a hasty retreat. No less affected by her sensual gait in her retreat, Dhruva lost his eyes to her, until she went out of his sight, but readily alive to her loss, he cursed himself for not sticking to the portico. Inexplicably obsessed with her, he rushed to the gate only to see her turning the bend even as Inspector Shakeel came into view on his Bajaj Pulsar.

When Shakeel greeted Dhruva, feeling lost, he forced himself to hug him, just as Dicey leapt up to the visitor in welcome, and as Raju took away the pet, Dhruva led the cop into the portico, wondering aloud what made him scarce, for nearly three months then. When Shakeel began to detail how he had reached the dead-end of the investigation of a double murder he was handling, the detective closed his eyes, as if to avoid reading the script from the cop's body language.

Shakeel's Fixation

When Inspector Shakeel entered the Saifabad police station, the echoes of the boots-in-attention greeted him, and as he stepped into his cabin, as if calling stand-at-ease, the telephone had started ringing. Soon, as Shakeel opened the *dak* folder, the Head Constable Karim rushed into the cabin to alert him about a double murder.

“Where was it?”

“At 13, Red Hills, sir,” said Karim

“Have you checked about the jurisdiction?” asked Shakeel, who was newly posted there.

“It’s a stone’s throw away, sir, in our very own Hyderabad,” said Karim unable to hide his irritation as if the question questioned his procedural knowledge.

“Who’re the victims?” asked Shakeel unhurriedly.

“Man and his mistress, sir.”

“What if it’s a suicide pact?”

“No sir, they were poisoned by the man’s wife.”

“Who told you so?”

“Pravar, sir, the dead woman’s brother, who said she’s absconding.”

“Let’s see how long she can evade me,” said Shakeel, getting up.

“Not long enough, sir,” said Karim stepping aside.

When the duo entered the drawing room of that single-storied building at 13, Red Hills, Pravar had drawn their attention to two empty glasses and a half-empty Teacher’s Scotch bottle on the teapoy, with *kbhara boondi* for company. When Shakeel surveyed the scene, Pravar ushered them into the adjacent bedroom, where Madhu and Mala lay dead on a double cot bed. Soon, as the forensic squad, summoned by then, was engaged in collecting the evidence, Pravar, who provided Shakeel a photograph of Radha, Madhu’s wife, made out a case that she could have poisoned the couple.

Leaving the corpses to Karim’s care, when Shakeel returned to the police station with Radha’s photograph, he was surprised to find her there ‘to aid the investigation’. But in spite of her assertions about her innocence, Shakeel, whose mind Pravar had poisoned, could see but her hand in the double murder, and so arraigned her as the sole suspect. But as his sustained custodial interrogation failed to crack her, believing in her guilt, with a view to extract her confession, he brought every police trick up his sleeve into play, including the third degree, but to no avail. Though eventually he had to set her free, owing to the judicial intervention, yet he failed to free himself from his sense of failure to pin her down to the murder of her man and his mistress. As he was cut up thus, seeing Dhruva’s ad in *The Deccan Chronicle* for a ‘lady sleuth to assist him’, he had a premonition that she might try to secure the position to secure herself. So as to preempt her, even in that inclement weather, he had set out that evening to 9, Castle Hills.

Having done with his preamble on a serious note, Shakeel said in a lighter vein that if only Radha were to come under the Dhruva’s wings, it could as well portend a romantic opening for him in his middle-age.

“When you began, I too thought that a murderess on the run makes an ideal prey to any womanizing cop like you, that is from what I’ve heard of you,” Dhruva said, and wanted to know if he had noticed a woman at the bend. Picking up Shakeel’s blank look, Dhruva said in jest that he had expected the cop to have an eye for women, if not an eye on the mafias. However, to Dhruva’s light-hearted banter, Shakeel said that though he fancied himself as a womanizer, from what he had heard about him he was no match to him. Dismissing all that as exaggerated hearsay, Dhruva led Shakeel into the study, where the latter poured out the problems the death of the man and his mistress posed to the investigation.

Madhu was hell-bent upon divorcing his wife Radha, which would have left her with a pittance of alimony, making her the prime suspect, never mind she was away with her friend when the illicit couple drank the poisoned Teacher’s Scotch to their death. Her motive to murder them made it an open-and-shut case; there was no difficulty in guessing that after poisoning the Scotch, she might have picked up a quarrel with them as an excuse to leave them in a huff. But yet her alibi had become a big hurdle for him to cross over to pin her down, more so for she withstood the sustained interrogation and came out clean even in the lie-detector test!

Unable to hide his admiration for the unknown woman, when Dhruva said as to how such a steely woman could have allowed herself to be so ill-treated, Shakeel said that she could as well be a tigress on the prowl in the garb of a lamb. With the detective evincing an interest in the perplexing case, the relieved cop savored the hot *pakodas* that Raju had fetched for him, all the while detailing his investigation, which based on hearsays bordered on surmises. However, when he ended his account by stating that the old guard, Appa Rao, told him that Radha reminded him of Mithya, whom Dhruva could not bring to book, the detective, with a perceptible change in his demeanor, dismissed it as learning curve. But as Shakeel persisted with the topic, Dhruva said that it was better they skipped it for it involved a dead woman, and when Raju came to serve them some Darjeeling tea, the detective changed the topic to the politics of the day that was after committing himself to solving the intriguing case.

Long after Shakeel had left him, Dhruva, having delved into his memory bank, was at fathoming the perplexing present.

Could the trespasser be the murderess after all! But then, given his focus on her, surely, Shakeel would have spotted her from a mile, even though the weather was too foggy for a proper sight. And in spite of her compelling face, he himself might fail to spot her if he were to espy her again before the contours of her exquisite frame would have turned hazy in his memory. Was it possible that she was indeed innocent save Shakeel’s silly theories; if it were indeed Radha, what had brought her to his gate; did she, as Shakeel thought, come to pander to him to preempt his involvement in the case? If it were so, why should she have been so tentative to begin with only to end up beating a hasty-retreat in the end? Could she be as ingenuous as Mithya though she seemed as seductive; would history repeat itself after all? Well, only time would tell, he thought.

As Dhruva seemed to love the idea of the trespasser being the alleged murderess, a restive Dicey went up to him making him wonder whether it sensed his distraction from its former mistress. Soon, he changed into his shorts and took the pet for a stroll in the twilight, by which time the drains were clear and the roads wore a fresh look glistening under the newly lit streetlights. However, as the roadside trees tried to dry up themselves, the pet and its master got wet, and with the chilly winds making it uneasy for them, as Dicey turned its tail homewards, as Dhruva led it home, Raju said that someone was waiting for him in the anteroom.

Ranjit's Predicament

As Dhruva stepped into the anteroom, he came face to face with a handsome man with an amiable face that bore the apprehensions of one who feared for the life and limb of a dear one. When the visitor introduced himself as Ranjit, the owner of *Oasis Builders*, assessing the middle-aged man as self-assured, Dhruva gave him a questioning look. But as Ranjit said that he came to seek his help in freeing Kavya, his thirty-six-year-old wife, kidnapped that very afternoon, Dhruva said in jest that he was not in cohorts with the kidnappers. Hiding his irritation, as Ranjit told him that his ad for a 'lady sleuth' had led him to the Castle Hills, Dhruva in wonder led him into the study, where Raju fetched them some steaming tea.

Ranjit said that he lived in *Spandan*, a bungalow in Jubilee Hills, with his well-qualified wife - L.L.B. added to M.A. in English – who remained a homemaker as he was averse to a working wife. Of late though, being barren and bored, as she turned keen on becoming a criminal lawyer, he didn't stall her from enrolling at the Bar, and yesterday, as she chanced to see Dhruva's ad for a 'lady sleuth', she felt that a stint as his 'assistant' would help her further her later day career. Aware though he was about the hazards such an occupation posed, as there was no way of stopping her, once she made up her mind, he had posted her application that very morning, of course, without visualizing that by the evening he had to seek the detective's help in rescuing her from her captors! Ranjit said that he was unable to fathom the vicissitudes of fate but his predicament made Dhruva see the imponderables of life.

Ranjit said that as Kavya's Alto was in the garage, she wanted him to send his Audi home at three-thirty to go to a friend's place; but given his own schedule of the day, he asked her to be on her own by hiring an auto; however, when it started raining heavily by three, he tried to contact her over phone but failed to get her either on the land line or on her mobile; so he called up her friend but she told him that she too was unaware of Kavya's whereabouts. When he rushed to *Spandan*, he found a ransom note slipped in through the main door that warned him not to approach the cops, but as Dhruva was fresh in his mind, he came to seek his help regardless. Ranjit pulled out the ransom note from his shirt pocket and handed it over to Dhruva, which read:

Ranjitji, be ready with three-crore rupees in thousand denominations (less luggage, more comfort, for us all) to have your wife back with you. Be at the Tanesha statue on the Tank Bund from four to six tomorrow evening in dark trousers and a white shirt to convey your consent. You have only four days to exchange your black money with your brilliant wife; be at the Tanesha between five and eight in the evening (mind the dress code) to take further instructions. Beware of involving the khakis as that would only fetch you your wife's body bag; it's no empty threat as you have her testimony hereunder. Be warned, if you carry any mobile phone with you, we will take the booty as well as your wife over your dead body.

When Ranjit confirmed that it was indeed Kavya's signature, as Dhruva secured the note and said that he would like to alert the cops, Ranjit told him sarcastically that instead of coming to Castle Hills, he himself could have gone to the Jubilee Hills Police Station. But as Dhruva maintained gravely that he saw a case to apprehend him as the prime suspect in his wife's kidnap, Ranjit lost his cool and demanded an explanation from him. Dhruva said that since there was no way Ranjit could have received

the ransom note with Kavya's signature on it, within an hour or so after her alleged kidnap, he should be put under the scanner. Pleased with Dhruva's eye for detail, Ranjit confessed that as he was preoccupied with his work, he could not contact Kavya all day but found the note only when he returned home in the evening, and added that he just tried to test the waters before he entrusted the case to Dhruva.

As though to outsmart Ranjit, Dhruva turned naughty and said that since Kavya's signature on the ransom note was genuine, it indeed was good news; but as Ranjit seemed lost at the comment, lest he should take him as a cynic, Dhruva explained that if it were forgery, it would have meant that the captors were out to barter her body for the booty. Ranjit, who remained apprehensive, said what if Kavya was bumped off after having obtained her signature, but Dhruva had assured him that the kidnappers were no morons to harm her as Ranjit wouldn't part with a farthing until he had ensured that she was kicking and alive. However, as Ranjit expressed his fears about his wife's possible molestation in captivity, Dhruva assured him that when a man kidnapped a woman for ransom, his lure for money would act as her chastity belt. Moreover, as the handwriting in the ransom note betrayed a feminine slant, the captor was either a woman or a male with a female accomplice, possibly a lover; if it were a woman who had kidnapped his wife, then there should be no violation save a lesbian aberration, and were it to be a man-woman enterprise, then the male enthusiasm for Kavya's possession had to contend with the proclivity of his female accomplice to stall the same; whatever, the idea of the kidnap was to collect ransom from the man and not to molest his wife.

When Dhruva wanted to know his take on the ransom, Ranjit said that he came to seek his help as he did not have so much money, which prompted Dhruva to say in jest that he was no moneylender; but as Ranjit offered to pay him a million rupees for his services, Dhruva said that it might come in handy as and when he handled the cases of the 'hand to mouths'. Ranjit offered to take Dhruva to *Spandan*, but in an auto for he made it to the Castle Hills by changing into a couple of them via a circuitous route. Patting Ranjit for his presence of mind, Dhruva led him to his Esteem, and on their way to the Jubilee Hills in the snarling traffic, Ranjit narrated his life and times with his wife.

Rags to Riches

Kavya, a child prodigy, was the only offspring of a financially hard-pressed couple from Kovvur. As her parents went to lengths to groom her well, she began to live up to their expectations, and that prompted them to shift to Hyderabad to cater to her big-ticket talent. While her father became a clerk in a real estate firm, her mother took to cooking for a 'working women's hostel', she strained her every nerve to top the school. But coinciding with her entry into the college, her father ventured into the real estate business, which by the time of her graduation in arts, grew into *Oasis Builders*.

Soon her parents made her marriage their dining table-talk; her mother, wanting her daughter to have a better start than she herself had, was bent upon a well-heeled groom but her father, still smarting from the snubs of his poor-groom days, vowed to give her hand to a 'nobody', who showed promise to become somebody. Un-enamored of riches, as Kavya sided with her father, he soon zeroed in on Ranjit, and bowled by his looks, she batted for him against her mother's objections. However, in deference

to her mother's wishes, she married Ranjit in the precincts of Lord Balaji, at Tirupathi, but sadly, in the return journey, as her parents were killed in a road mishap, the *Oasis Builders* too landed in the groom's lap.

By the time Ranjit finished the recap of his life and times with Kavya, as they reached Road No 69 leading up to *Spandan*, Dhruva brought the Esteem to a halt at the street corner. Letting Ranjit walk down the desolate road, Dhruva stayed back to ensure that none followed him, however wanting to be alerted on the mobile just in case. Soon Dhruva too made it to *Spandan*, but before entering the compound, he focused his torch on the road nearby but once in, closing the gate behind them, he scanned the rain-drenched lawn and said that Kavya had left home when it was still raining, and might have unwittingly hired an auto-rickshaw, lying in wait for her.

Stepping into *Spandan* proper and having scanned the insides, Dhruva asked Ranjit for a picture of Kavya, and when he was given her photo album, struck by her stunning looks, he felt that her photogenic features could be the indices of her stunning persona. While trying to envision the poise of the vivacious woman, who would have become his assistant in the normal course, Dhruva wondered whether her kidnapping would be the loss of his lifetime. When the impropriety of holding on to the album dawned on Dhruva, he handed it back to Ranjit with the assurance that she would be back in her husband's arms before he started missing her.

Soon, after revealing the opening moves of the Operation Checkmate to set Kavya free from her kidnappers, Dhruva left *Spandan*, and even as he got into his Esteem, he called up Shakeel, on his mobile, wanting him to set the informers behind the usual suspects. However, as the latter broached the topic of nailing Radha, recalling the mysterious trespasser, Dhruva wondered if the temptress was indeed Radha and whether she would venture again back to 9, Castle Hills. When Shakeel insisted to know about his plans to unravel her mystery, Dhruva said that the clue about her whereabouts might as well lie in her destiny.

Back home, after a quick shower, with his favorite Old Monk with Thums Up for company, Dhruva began working on various moves of the endgame, and soon succeeded in affecting a mental checkmate of her captors. However, the thought that Kavya might not have any stomach left for the risky endeavors of a sleuth made him feel like he was back to square one in his quest for a capable hand. After an unappetizing dinner as he retired to bed thinking about both the women in the same vein, he wondered if the woman 'at the gate' was indeed Radha, and felt that it was difficult to imagine her as a murderess. He thought what if Shakeel had showed him her photograph that Pravar gave him, and wondered why he failed to ask for it himself? Maybe Radha could be a seductress to rival Mithya, and he thought in the same vein, what of Kavya, a rare beauty, well, could there be temptresses like her! Besides, won't Kavya be an invaluable asset even if she were half as cerebral as her husband pictured her? Would she like to join him after all? When it suits him to have either Kavya or Radha to assist him, what bonus it could be if both of them join him. Won't it be real fun with both of them around but given the attendant jealousies, it could as well be a hard grind for him.

What with the myriad thoughts about them storming his head; he had a disturbed sleep that night.

Dhruva's Dilemma

Waking up early in the morning and quickly finishing his chores, Dhruva stood in the portico; staring at the gate incessantly, he was at loss to comprehend his obsession for an unknown woman, possibly a murderess. But weary of a long vigil and wiser to the hopeless wait, as he retreated into his study, he was lost in fine-tuning the *Operation Checkmate* of Kavya's captors. When Raju appeared at the lunch-time, Dhruva wanted to be served in the study itself; and after his siesta, grabbing the mail that Raju brought, he found the expected one from Kavya and an unexpected one from one Radha Rani, C/o Begumpet post office.

'How ingeniously inviting; is she the alleged murderess?' he thought, having read Radha's letter. 'But then Shakeel was referring to her as Radha and not as Radha Rani; maybe he gave a damn to the superfluous Rani, akin to the vainglorious Devi suffixed to many a name. Sans the suffix, can Radha be the real one or her namesake? Isn't the duality of the possibility intriguing? Whoever it may be, can she be as good as Mithya where it matters? What would come of it if she were to be a willing plain thing? Surely she would spare me the perils of attraction in the portals of proximity for the serene company of an un-alluring dame is good for the peace of mind than the flirting tryst with an evasive temptress. But then, without the tumult of the heart, can there be life in the life; oh, how the absence of woman is killing!'

Given her eagerness for the job, Dhruva felt that Radha might be right up there at the post office waiting for his interview call, and so he penned a call-letter post-haste and hurried Raju on the errand wondering what the future had in store for him. However, seeing Raju's back, as he readily picked up Kavya's letter, he was amused at his fickle mindedness for having given precedence to an unknown woman over someone he himself had fancied.

'Added to the stream of boldness, isn't there a strain of rashness to Kavya's persona?' he thought folding her letter. 'If not for the fiasco, wouldn't she have filled the gap that Mithya's death had created in his professional life? Why foreclose the option, as all it takes is to see that my interview call greets her on her return to *Spandan*, and who knows, after the dust settles down, she may not be averse for a positive response. But Ranjit should be cautioned not to let her know about my involvement in the *Operation Checkmate*. Even if I were to click with Radha, nay Rani, why shouldn't Kavya provide the second string to my investigative bow? What if I fall in love with her as well? So what, that would be the second one to the Cupid's thing, what a welcome prospect that would be; why place the cart before the horse, when life would take its own course anyway.'

When the clock struck four, Dhruva, attired in black trousers and a white shirt (he wanted to dress like Ranjit, and be present nearby the Tanesha statue every day till the D-day to let Kavya's captors take him to be a regular) stepped out of his abode to step into an auto. Reaching the Tank Bund shortly thereafter, he got down from it at the Nannaya statue and walked up to the nearby Siddhendrayogi's; finding Ranjit at the Tanesha's, he himself settled on the lush green lawns where with a book in hand, and seemingly engrossed in it, he kept a hawk's eye on the traffic and the passers-by alike.

Around five, a white Maruti Zen, driven by a twenty-something guy, slowed down as it neared the Tanesha from the Ranigunj side. Before it was six, as that car of Karnataka registration made two more rounds in like fashion, Dhruva thought the one at the wheel could be the driving force behind Kavya's kidnap. As he came alone to pick up Ranjit's signal, Dhruva had reasoned that at least two persons could be involved in the kidnap, and that the other, possibly the woman who penned the

ransom note, may be holding Kavya captive. Though Dhruva suspected that the Zen could be a stolen one, yet he called up Shakeel to pass on the vehicle number, after which he left the scene leaving Ranjit alone.

Back home, as Dhruva awaited Rani's anticipated arrival, Shakeel called him to seek his helping hand to close in on an interstate counterfeit-note racket that came to the fore. Though he was disinclined to leave home lest he should miss out on Rani, if she were to show up, yet his proclivity to face professional challenges got the better of his need for courting the woman he enamored; so, briefing Raju as to how to deal with the expected visitor, in case she turned up, Dhruva left for the Saifabad police station.

After Shakeel had detailed him about the conflicting leads to the evasive racketeers, burning a lot of midnight oil, Dhruva developed a blueprint of the *Operation Moolah* for Shakeel to act upon. Having left Shakeel to fine-tune the logistics of the operation, when Dhruva reached home fearing that he might have missed the date with Rani, Raju told him that none came to see him.

'How I hoped that this Rani would fill the void caused by Mithya's death,' he thought. 'Am I flattered to be deceived?'

What with his obsession for Rani that accentuated the pain of his yearlong loneliness occasioned by Mithya's death growing by the hour; he became pensive thinking that she might have developed second thoughts about joining him. Soon, as his thoughts insensibly turned to Kavya, he felt that had Oscar Wilde espied her, he would have paraphrased his smoking quote as an ode to her - the perfect example of a perfect beauty - and wondered what would have happened had she, instead of being kidnapped, made it to 9, Castle Hills.

Dhruva began to imagine the possibilities and that kept him awake for long until his tiredness induced him to sleep.

The Gatecrasher

While Dhruva was still lounging in his bed, Raju announced the arrival of a middle-aged woman. Wondering whether it could be Rani, Dhruva asked Raju to make her feel at home in the study before he could receive her. So, while Dhruva took his sweet time to put his best foot forward, Raju began lifting him to the skies before her, and when he heard approaching steps, he left the scene to make way for his master's entry.

Sensing the import of the moment, even as she stood up in all eagerness, realizing at the threshold that she was the one he was craving for, Dhruva turned ecstatic in his approach; as he ogled at her unabashedly, she, enamored of him, turned coy, making him covetous. Bowled by his masculinity, as she seemed willing, he advanced towards her, and as if to quench their common thirst in the sands of lust, she too rushed to him as one would towards an oasis in a desert. While he opened his arms impulsively, parting her lips sanguinely, she sank into him with alacrity, and as if to cement their union, he closed in on them passionately. Seemingly induced by his ardency, as her femininity came to the fore, as he was feeling that his dream came true, she unlocked his lips as if to regain her breath, and he crooned into her ears that ever since he saw her at the threshold of his domain, he had a premonition that she would come back to him. Averring that she tried to test the waters before she ventured into the whirlpool of his romance, she reached for his lips all again.

Gripping her in his ardent embrace, when Dhruva asked her if she was Radha, the alleged murderess, having crooned into his ear that she was Rani the man-eater, she bit it coquettishly. Writhing in pain, as he told her that he fell in love with her as Radha the killer, turning coy, she said that she came for the kill and so he was better on guard against her ambush. Feigning alarm, as he withdrew from her, taking his arm enticingly, as if to reassure him, she said that he might as well banish Radha from his mind and engage her with his ardor; and as he hugged her endearingly, smug in his embrace, she said coyly that she craved for a live-in with him. When he told her in jest that he needed to take the consent of Raju and his wife Vimala, who attended on him, she said teasingly that she would beg them to 'let her in' so that she could 'let him in'. Winking at her, as he said that it shouldn't be a hassle for Raju was a retired constable who was ever devoted to him, she said in half jest that she hoped to be blessed with a like devotion from his master; and as if to demonstrate his intent, going down on his knees and hugging her at her declivity, he assured her more of it. Enthralled by his romanticism, as she lifted him to her bosom, he led her to his room, where, giving herself in coition, she goaded him on to their orgasm.

After a sensually fulfilling time followed by a sumptuous lunch, when he went into his siesta, she left for her dwelling to fetch her belongings.

Waking up at three, he left for the Tank Bund and as soon as he sat with a book in hand at the Tanesha statue to monitor the moving vehicles, he noticed a blue Santro slowing down; noticing that it was the same guy who made rounds in the white Maruti Zen the other day, he could discern his puzzled look at finding a different character in the stipulated dress code. However, after making a couple of rounds as the guy sped away towards Ranigunj, at five, Dhruva left the place in satisfaction and reached 9, Castle Hills, in expectation.

Back home, as the thrill of finding Rani-in-wait made him reminisce about his times with Mithya, Dhruva told her how he looked forward to her filling the emotional void in his life. When Rani teased him that after having had his fill with her, he might as well be craving for a refill with his Radha, leading her to the liquor-cabinet, he told her that she could fathom his mind by keeping him high. What with Rani's company affording him a regular night for the first time after Mithya's demise, he had gone into deep sleep thinking about the regular day to follow.

Having had an exhilarating day with a doting live-in, he, in the evening, took her along with him to the Tank Bund, and as she strolled around the place, he sat near the Tanesha, waiting for the rigmarole to begin. When the guy, this time in the white Maruti Zen, slowed down near him, Dhruva could clearly see that he was puzzled by his presence that day as well. However, after making a couple of rounds, as that chap drove away for the day, Dhruva joined Rani and took her for a boat-ride in the abutting Hussainsagar. Though she wanted to hear about the nitty-gritty of the *Operation Checkmate* in the making, so as not to spoil their joy-ride, he said that she might as well see the drama unfold itself on the D-day the next day.

Operation Checkmate

It was 4 P.M the D-day. As Dhruva was raring to go, Rani was in no hurry to desert her dressing table; but when he began hurrying her, as she hastened down the stairs, she slipped on the staircase. Though she said that she was fine, yet he drove her to

the Hyderabad Nursing Home, where the doctor ruled out a fracture, but ignoring Rani's pleas to be taken on board, he sent her home with Raju, who came in tow with them.

Walking up to the nearby Tank Bund, Dhruva soon reached the Siddhendrayogi statue, and seeing the white Maruti Zen in the parking bay, he realized that the game was on though there was none to be seen around. But even before he could settle down on the lawns aside the majestic statue, Ranjit drove his Audi into the same parking bay. Alighting from his car with two bulging travel bags, a visibly nervous Ranjit passed by Dhruva towards the nearby Tanesha statue. Soon, beginning in trickles, as people started flocking to the place to occupy vantage points on the sprawling lawns as well as on the tank-side benches, as if on cue, a handful of fast food vendors descended upon the scene to spread all over; even as they were trying to induce those present to have a bite, the toy-*wallahs*, who followed them, did not lag behind in tempting the kids with fancy playthings.

When a fast food vendor, apparently in disguise, posited his *chaat* basket near the Tanesha statue, seeing him ill at ease in the calling, Dhruva knew that he was indeed the one to be marked. As the sun began to set on the Hussainsagar Lake, the vendor went up to Ranjit, and preparing some *chaat* for him, he began to chitchat with him; soon, handing over the stuff in a paper-plate to Ranjit, the imposter, on the sly, passed on his mobile to him. With a satisfied look on his face as Ranjit unzipped both the travel bags, elated, the guy took away the mobile from him and having connected it to someone; he gave it back to Ranjit, who seemed relieved as he held it to his ear. As Ranjit tended to hold on to it, the guy withdrew it from him and waited in the wings without taking his eyes off him; and when it got a little darker, he signaled to Ranjit to go down the staircase in the backside that led to the road below. When Ranjit picked up the bags and ventured into the vault of that staircase, the guy called someone on his mobile; soon abandoning his wares as is where, as he too followed suit, Dhruva reached for his mobile.

Shortly thereafter, covering her face with her *pallu*, as a young woman emerged from the staircase and walked towards the Maruti Zen, discerning excitement in her nervous gait, Dhruva knew that she was the accomplice of Kavya's captor. As arraigning her was not part of the *Operation Checkmate*, he let her drive away in the car; moreover, without spying her visage, yet he had experienced an unusual empathy for her. Soon, as Ranjit too passed him by with Kavya, his eyes followed her all the way to the Audi; what with her glowing persona and pleasing poise, even in that dull setting, appealed to his romanticism, he could not help but divine her provocative figure in her evocative gait; and finding her enchanting in her state of confusion he began wondering how enticing she could be in the moments of her excitation. So, when Shakeel called him to inform him about the capture of the kidnapper, he was still under the mesmeric spell of Kavya's unusual charms that he had earlier visualized from her photographs. However, it was the breaking news from Shakeel that the culprit turned out to be Pravar that diverted his mind to the mysterious Radha, the suspected murderess.

Amazed though at the development, Dhruva, turning business-like, wanted Shakeel to send someone to pick up Pravar's *chaat* basket, whatever be its forensic worth; and waiting for a constable to come to pick up the thing, he called up Rani to enquire about the state of her 'leggy self'. Learning that she was jumping like a jack and was eager for the news, as he apprised her of the developments at the Tank Bund, she blamed with him for having deprived her thrill of participation; and having cajoled her, he said in half jest that he hoped she would not hold it against him to deny him the thrill of their nocturnal adventure.

Foul on Pravar

Reaching 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva was nudged by Rani into the drawing room, where Raju laid the drinks for them - Old Monk with Thums Up for him and Gin with Sprite for her. Even before he had had his first sip, as she pressed him to blurt out, tuning into TV9, he told her that she should first hear it from the horse's mouth at 9. Lighting his cigar as he savored it along with the rum, she told him that in the excitement of the moment, the aroma of the *lanka pogaku* was more exhilarating than ever.

Soon Shakeel was seen on the TV screen along a handcuffed youth, whom he named as Pravar the kingpin of the fake-note racket that he had busted that evening. As Karim laid bundles of thousand-rupees notes on the table before a dazed Pravar, Shakeel boasted that the police would catch the other members of the gang sooner than later.

"I don't believe a word of that cop," said Rani. "Why his body language spoke all lies."

"Given the stock of the khakis," said Dhruva, "you can't be faulted."

"But I will fault you," she said coyly, "if you default in telling the truth."

"What struck me in the ransom note was the kidnappers' choice of a rendezvous that too at a time when it gets crowded the most," he said, switching off the TV and lighting a fresh cigar. "Maybe the idea was to enable the kidnappers to spot the cops in *mufti*, if any, but still, it was risky as the police could lay in wait for them on either side of the Tank Bund. Wouldn't have the kidnappers taken that into account? It only meant that they could hit upon a foolproof plan to facilitate the *Operation Exchange*. Why were they specific that Ranjit waited near the Tanesha statue? When I focused on the location, what came to the fore was the nearby 'vaulted staircase' that led from the Tank Bund down to the roadside Maisamma temple."

"When we were in Gaganmahal, I used to climb up the stairs for my morning walk on the Tank Bund," she said reminiscently.

"How I wish I had met you then," he said winking at her.

"Better late than never, isn't it?"

"Not in the affairs of heart; thank god we have aligned before it was too late to write home about it," he said squeezing her hand. "Well, given the location of the staircase, it was easy to visualize the contours of their envisaged plan; while the male interlocutor would deal with Ranjit on the Tank Bund, his female accomplice would hold Kavya on the road below, desolated at that hour. Once Ranjit got down the staircase with the ransom Kavya could be led up for the operation exchange midway with the captors blocking the way both ways. Even if someone were to use the staircase then, the Ranjits could be silenced with advance threats, and what is more, the double entry or exit as the case may be, affords the kidnappers a two-way get-away either in their Zen or in their Santro."

"Isn't it foolproof?" said Rani, "But how come they came a cropper?"

"No denying that but ironically it's the brilliance of the idea that betrayed their plan," said Dhruva. "I thought of freeing Kavya, by arraigning her captor without her partner on the Tank Bund getting wind of it but as you know by then, Shakeel laid his hands on those fake notes in the *Operation Moolah* though the culprits gave him the slip. I don't know why, but I got a naughty idea; what if the fake money was clothed as ransom amount and the kidnapper pictured as the kingpin of the counterfeit racket?"

Though Shakeel was excited at that prospect, yet he was afraid of the pitfalls, and it took a great deal of effort for me to make him fall in line.”

Rani admired him for his ingenuous idea but Dhruva said that on second thoughts he felt that it was morally dark and conceptually unethical; turning remorseful as he said that, given a chance, he would not repeat it for sure, she told him that the episode brought to the fore her own guilt in a cynical act, and like him, she too would not like to repeat it. Puzzled by her mane and manner, he pressed her to confide in him but smiling sweetly, she said that he might wait as she was not running away from him right then. When he said in jest that he would break her legs to stop her from leaving him, she coquettishly reminded him that she was within his arms reach, and as he took her into his arms, he received a call from Shakeel.

Complimenting Shakeel for the finesse in the execution of the *Operation Checkmate*, though Dhruva invited him to come home to exchange notes, the cop excused himself, as he had to rush to his native place to see his ailing mother.

Stockholm Syndrome

When Ranjit reached 9, Castle Hills, in its sprawling backyard, Dhruva was playing shuttle badminton with Rani. As Raju announced Ranjit’s arrival, Dhruva playfully told Rani that he would like to flaunt her before the visitor. Turning coquettish, she told him that she had no eyes for any other man, and not to be outdone, he said that had she been there on the Tank Bund the other day, Ranjit would have lost his eyes for her, thereby putting Pravar in a fix. She said joyously that though she was flattered, she was eager to know how Kavya could have spent the time with her captors, and he told her she better eavesdrop as he closeted with the visitor. Chiding him for wanting to spoil her, she got into the swimming pool, and he went into the study to meet with Ranjit.

Dismissing Dhruva’s apologies for having kept him waiting, Ranjit lost no time in scolding him for the fake-notes mess he had created for him albeit falling short of demanding compensation for the damage caused. Turning apologetic for not having taken him into confidence, Dhruva explained that had Ranjit been privy to the plan, he would have probably fumbled in handling Pravar, and that would have put Kavya’s life at risk. However, Ranjit bemoaned that Kavya was cut up with him for playing foul with Pravar for he was so fair to her.

Cajoled by Dhruva that all that would come to a pass, Ranjit placed the Kavya-cards on the table - around three that day, she locked the gate and wondered how to hire an auto in the pouring rain; what a hassle it was in Hyderabad to hire an auto as the *auto-wallahs* tended to veto the *savaaris*. So, when a youth drove his auto straight up to her, thinking it was a Godsend, she got into it, and to spare herself the spatter, she gratefully accepted his offer to unwind the Rexene windshields. Not long after they turned the bend, as a well-drenched young woman was beckoning for an auto, he wanted to know from Kavya whether she would mind accommodating the hapless lass. As an unsuspecting Kavya agreed to his proposition, he let the grateful woman share the backseat with her.

The next thing that Kavya could recall was that she woke up in an alien place with the pair around, who, after introducing themselves as Pravar and Natya, began to press her to disclose her man’s monitory worth. Kavya kept mum but as he warned her

that she better revealed that before he forced her to tell about her man's manly worth as well, she retorted that it was unbecoming of a man to tick a woman on the sly. But when he asked Natya to leave him alone to let him eye her assets, afraid of rape, and desperately holding Natya, Kavya agreed to cooperate. He thought of a ransom of five-crore rupees but Kavya told him that he might as well prepare himself for her perpetual captivity; even as he scaled it down to three-crores, yet as she protested, he told her that she might as well count her days if her man was not prepared to cough up even that much.

They confined her to the guestroom of that desolated house on the outskirts, and having warned her against any misadventure, they still took turns to guard her, lest she should give them a slip. Pravar was younger to Kavya by twelve years, but whenever she was alone with him, she was ever in fright that he might turn eager for her; during nights, even though, holding the rope that tied both her hands, he was fast asleep on the floor, keeping an eye on him, she used to keep awake on the cot all night. He always tried to win her sympathy by picturing his wayward life and Natya too went out of her way to earn her goodwill by catering to her every need. When Kavya told him that once freed, she might practice law, Pravar joked that if only she took his briefs, he would ensure that her wallet bulged like a pregnant womb. Well, his semantics only helped aggravate her lurking fear of rape that was at the back of her mind all the while - that was the long and short of Kavya's ordeal of a kidnapping.

Asked by Dhruva about his rendezvous on the Tank Bund, Ranjit said that after verifying the ransom and ensuring that there were no khakis in *mufti* around, Pravar let him talk to Kavya on the mobile. Later, followed by Pravar, as Ranjit was half way down the staircase, he saw Natya leading Kavya up the steps, and after the *operation exchange*, as Natya ascended the stairs; Pravar descended it with the false booty of fake-notes. Later, upon learning that Shakeel falsely implicated Pravar, as Kavya became furious, and wanted an explanation from him, he told her that he had no inkling about it. While she saw it as a dirty trick of the police to serve their own ends, he tried to pacify her by saying that, in either case, Pravar had to serve the sentence. Maintaining that it was no justification for such falsification, she recalled what Pravar said in jest about her being his lawyer and wondered aloud what if she took up his case.

As Ranjit lamented that he was at a loss to understand her inexplicable behavior, after cautioning him not to let Kavya ever wiser to the nuances of her rescue act, Dhruva tried to counsel him to keep his cool while she got over her nerves. Harping on how the *Operation Checkmate* had upset his mate, Ranjit wondered of what avail it all was, and thus having put Dhruva on the back foot, he gave him a cheque for a paltry sum of Rupees twenty-thousand. Measuring Ranjit's meanness in that meager amount, yet Dhruva told him that he was free to call on him if ever needed any help, and as an after-thought enquired about the fate of his call letter to Kavya. Ranjit merely said that having read it, she had tucked it in her handbag.

Seeing Ranjit's back, as Dhruva turned pensive, Rani, failing to enliven him with her coquetry, nevertheless, managed to cajole him into breaking his silence; he said he was worried that the foisted case on Pravar might end up hurting Kavya in inexplicable ways. Rani wondered how that could be and he elucidated the intriguing features of the 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

"It's a psychic state in which the kidnapped turn sympathetic to their captors after they are freed," he said. "It is said that the survival instinct activates the defensive mechanism in the captives to let them identify themselves with the captors to ward off possible violence against them. In that state of emotional stress and physical duress, accentuated by a sense of helplessness dominated by fear, the captives magnify small acts of kindness by their captors. Wonder how I failed to factor that!"

“What an irony is that!” said Rani.

“Courtesy those four days in Pravar’s captivity, apparently her latent sympathies for the underdogs resurged,” he said pensively. “Maybe, she came to identify herself more with her depraved captor, than with her mean man, who came to enjoy her father’s largesse.”

“I’ve heard of a story, fact or fiction I can’t say,” said Rani. “Seeing a murderer being paraded to the gallows, it was love at first sight for a girl, and what’s more, she wanted to marry him before he was hanged, and so begged the king to spare his life; my memory fails me at that.”

“Dear, it’s all about the imponderables of human psychology,” said Dhruva. “Coming to Kavya, it is possible that in Ranjit’s move to deny Pravar the ransom, she could have seen the propensity of the rich to deprive the poor. Now that Pravar was falsely implicated, her sympathy for him would have acquired weird emotional wings; given Ranjit’s deceitfulness towards pravar, she might even begin to lean towards her ex-captor even more. Where it all might lead her to, her fate only would know; how I wish she wouldn’t become another Patty Hearst. You may know that Hearst became an accomplice of her captors to assist them, of all things, in bank robberies. May God forbid that to Kavya, but the silver-lining was that Hearst could come out of her psychic aberration to disown her gory association. Maybe, as I created the mess, I may have to clear it up as well.”

An Aborted Affair

Rani proposed a trip to Ooty to let him bide his time as she did his bidding. Though Dhruva was inclined towards ‘train journey’ as she opted to ‘air dash’ so as not to ‘lose time’, they had boarded the Indian Airlines flight that very evening. On their way from the airport to an Ooty hotel, even as the serene surroundings of the hill resort refreshed his mind, her innate romanticism enamored his heart, and once ensconced in the hotel suite, they made it their love nest, and rarely ventured out of it.

Soon, amidst the ‘time of their lives’, Ranjit rang up to lament over the ugly turn in his life.

Disregarding his protestations, Kavya met Pravar in the Cherlapalli jail and apologized to him for what had happened, and the culprit played up to her psyche by exaggerating his plight ensuring that she developed an obsession to earn him a reprieve. While Ranjit would have none of that, yet she took up Pravar’s *vakalat* making him wonder where all that would lead her to and he was at a loss to understand how to wean her away from Pravar.

Dismayed at the development, Dhruva said that it was better that Ranjit kept his cool as under the circumstances, the best course of action was inaction. He also advised Ranjit to leave her alone until she got over her obsession for any hurdles he might place in her way might buttress her resolve to surmount them, leading her to a disastrous end.

Making it a double jeopardy for Dhruva, a week later, a furious Shakeel rang him up to recount how Kavya hauled him over the coals in the court on Pravar’s account. She urged the court to take note of the fact that Pravar was a petty thief and not a mafia don and drove home the point that he was the sole accused while it was inconceivable that one can single-handedly run a multi-crore fake-note racket. She argued that Shakeel would have earlier seized the booty while the real culprits might have given him the slip, or who knew, whether or not he let them off under pressure of the powers that be, and so as to cover up his lapse,

and to earn false laurels, he tried to make her client his fall guy. She alleged that it was Shakeel's compulsions to crack the case, or his expediency to protect the guilty that was behind his foisting a false case on Pravar.

What was more; Kavya sought to prove Pravar's innocence and produced Natya for a witness, who sensationally revealed that in the days before the alleged crime, Kavya was with Pravar and her. And that stunned all including the judge. What with Natya having come up trumps in the intense cross-examination that followed, there was no way the public prosecutor could have pulled the rug from under her feet as no case of kidnap was registered against Pravar or her. As the judge was quick in passing strictures against Shakeel making him curse Dhruva for once, he nevertheless asked the public prosecutor to seek time for further investigation. When the judge ordered the release of Pravar on bail, all applauded Kavya's sterling performance, and as a grateful Pravar thanked her no end an appalled Ranjit led her out of the court hall.

Dhruva had to strain every nerve to convince Shakeel that their failure was owing to the 'Stockholm Syndrome' that he himself failed to factor in while fashioning the *Operation Checkmate*. Whatever, Shakeel vowed to get even with Kavya but Dhruva cautioned him to guard himself against the wounded Pravar instead. With the damage done and his pride dented, Dhruva showed no inclination to return home, though, on and off; Shakeel goaded him to be back soon while Rani was all-eager to make the best of their sojourn.

In the euphoria of their whirlwind romance that rolled days and nights into one, time seemed to them but a fleeting moment of life. Soon he sought her hand in marriage but she excused herself, and perplexed though, he was unrelenting in his passionate pleas; when she disclosed that she was a married woman, he was aghast beyond belief, but, nonetheless, bowled by her charms, he insisted that she divorce her man to adorn his life. While she remained unmoved, devastated by her refusal to yield, he wanted to know what made her flirt with him so heartlessly.

Rani's parents hailed from Waltair, where she graduated in arts; soon after she moved over to Hyderabad, she met Ramesh, to whose advances she had readily yielded; but realizing the gravity of her transgression, she goaded him to regularize their irregular union. While he wanted time to sort out things with his parents, who were averse to her on caste considerations, her parents were in a hurry to give her hand to Satish, who they thought was a suitable boy. When she ran out of excuses to avoid Satish's hand, as she forced the issue with Ramesh, he revealed that he was a married man, and shaken to the core, she married Satish to repair her life, as his wife.

What with Satish's charm and wit inducing warmth in her life, she soon got over the bitterness of her betrayed past, and for the first ten years, they had been reaping the fruits of their love though without laying the seeds of it, and that was the only jarring note in their blessed life. Maybe to make up for the lacking, Satish began to be obsessed with his career to the exclusion of all else, and that made her bear the brunt of her barrenness; three years back, he developed an ambition to start a venture of his own, which made him turn their home into his office in the offing. While he began to court his career with passion, as her urges remained in the cold, she was constrained to entertain the idea of an extramarital affair.

When she made up her mind to spice up her life with a paramour, as she recalled Ramesh's trickery, her bitterness came to acquire a vengeful edge, and she developed an urge to play *a la Ramesh* after a hectic sexual give-and-take to get even with a man in this man's world. Then she recalled the cop who had put her cousin Ashok's murder under the carpet, over which he led his

murderess wife Mithya to the altar, and thought of busting that cop. When she came to know that Mithya was no more and her cop lover became Detective Dhruva, she knew he was the ideal target

While she was upbeat at that thought, coinciding with Satish's trip to the U.S, came Dhruva's ad for a lady assistant; it was her idea to incite his curiosity by loitering at the gate that rainy day as a prelude to taking him into her arms; but when she realized that Kavya was proving to be a source of distraction, she had goaded him to Ooty to have the best of him. But lost in his passion, she lost the desire to unearth his past, and as he began to love her, she developed an urge to conceive his child, which she hoped she would. She would have loved to make love to him until she had missed her periods, but as Satish was due by the weekend; it had to be a premature end to their liaison, but for all she knew, their child might be in the offing.

Dhruva in despair begged her to divorce Satish and marry him but she said that she would rather stick to her man than tie up with a philanderer like him. Even though he vouched for his lifelong fidelity, she didn't relent to be his wife, and to turn her around, he played up to her ego and said that he could not imagine life without her. Unmoved still, as she said that he being ladies' man, she was sure that there wouldn't be any dearth of mates for him, he begged her not to make it a sudden death to his ardor and keep their affair alive until he could douse the flame. She told him that it was no way to make the best of the hoped for change in her life and he said that she was being unfair to him; maintaining that it was part of life, she told him that he would be able to put all that behind him well before someone else caught his eye.

Psyche of Revenge

When a dejected Dhruva returned home that evening, Raju informed him that a woman named Radha came to see him in the morning. What with the lost love and his hurt ego haunting him, he thought no more of petticoat chasing, even if it were Radha the suspected murderess, so he thought. Whatever, to catch up with the lost time and to get back to business, he invited Shakeel to review the *Operation Checkmate* afresh over a couple of drinks.

Lying in wait in *mufti* near Maisamma temple, said Shakeel sipping Teachers on rocks, he sighted the earmarked Santro, driven by a young woman in her twenties. When she brought the vehicle to a halt opposite the roadside shrine, though she didn't readily alight from it, yet he alerted the patrol parties at all the exit points. When he nearly tired of keeping focus on the target in that dim light, he saw the woman lead Kavya out of the vehicle and into the vaulted staircase. Shortly thereafter, he spotted a young man stepping out of the staircase with the handbags that he had arranged for the *Operation Checkmate*. While the guy got into the Santro, a Skoda passed him by, and in the flash of its headlights, he was surprised to realize that the kidnapper was Pravar. When Pravar steered the car to the Ramakrishna Mutt Road, he had alerted the patrol party in wait near the *Dharna Chowk*, and by the time, he joined them, the police had already nabbed the stunned culprit. However, during interrogation, as Pravar revealed his hand in the unresolved double murder of Madhu and Mala, it was Shakeel's turn to be shocked at his own investigative naivety.

Sparing Shakeel further humiliation, Dhruva, for once, didn't spar him with his barbs, and instead wanted him to picture Pravar's background for him to gauge its likely affect on Kavya's perturbed psyche. Shakeel, as he began to sketch Pravar's skewed past, was rather surprised at Dhruva's never before eagerness.

Mala was ten when Pravar was born, and soon after, as their mother became sickly, their father took to drinking, further denting their family resources. What with a drunkard father to contend with, a sickly mother to tend to and a young sibling to groom, Mala began to mature more than her age. When Pravar was ten, she married the miserly Suraiah, a measly clerk in the civil works department; she herself believed that a *paisa* spent was far more worthy than a rupee hoarded. Soon, her mother died, making Pravar an orphan in his own home that was nearly impoverished by then; but when their father too kicked the bucket, she took him under her wings for his succor and support. Pravar was fourteen then.

The move didn't auger well for Pravar as he was torn between his sister's affection and his brother-in-law's resentment to his presence in the house, which turned him into a schizophrenic: as his physical proximity with her induced in him a sub-conscious sexual affinity for her, her marital closeness with the man he abhorred bred a sexual jealousy in him. When his sense of helplessness eventually turned him into a bully in the *galli*, even as his rowdyism perturbed Mala, it attracted Rajan, a minor bootlegger, who took him under his tutelage. As Suraiah began to jibe at Mala on that count, it only furthered Pravar's subconscious oneness with his sister; however Suraiah died soon, leaving Pravar with no rival to Mala's affections insensibly augmenting his sense of possessiveness of her. Pravar began to dote upon Mala like never before, which suited her as well, for it catered to her innate need for male attention. But things changed when she was absorbed in the department on compassionate grounds and Radha's man Madhu, who happened to be her boss lost no time in wooing her on the emotional plane.

Around that time, Rajan happened to meet the sixteen year-old Natya in an orphanage and tricked her into eloping with him; even as his boss boasted about his conquest, bitten by her charms, Pravar was obsessed with possessing her, however, perceiving it as a betrayal of his devotion to Mala. While he was beset emotionally thus, the lifting of prohibition in the State ending bootlegging had hurt him monetarily too as the contraband was disbanded.

Then, Rajan thought of extortion as a way out for the three of them, and as Pravar gained ground on the crime front, Mala slipped on the sexual ground to become Madhu's mistress. While that development distressed Pravar morally, seeing Mala bestow all her attentions on Madhu, he was depressed emotionally as well; however, he found a soul mate in Raghu, Radha's young son, whom Madhu began reducing into Mala's errand boy. Pravar took up cudgels with Mala on Raghu's behalf but perceiving that was the privilege of a mistress, she paid a deaf ear to his protestations. Soon Pravar came to identify himself with the hapless Raghu, and that made him resent Mala's liaison even more.

Abetted by Pravar when Raghu rebelled, an irate Madhu said that for all he knew, he could be a bastard and as Raghu in humiliation committed suicide on the railway tracks; Pravar felt that Madhu had no right to live, and so also Mala, who was no less callous. Also Pravar came to perceive Radha as a cock-pecked wife, unwilling to protect her hapless son, and that evaporated the sympathy he felt for her, as a neglected wife, owing to his sister's trespass onto her marital bed. So it was Pravar's conscious sense of hurt, abetted by his subconscious righteousness that steeled his heart against the trio.

After Raghu's death, as Madhu started taking Mala home, Pravar worked on a plan to eliminate them all without soiling his hands that developed the skill to tamper with bottle seals during his bootlegger days. Aware that under Madhu's influence, Mala took to drinking, he presumed that Radha would like a drink as well, so he poisoned a bottle of Teacher's Scotch, and waited for the day that Madhu and Mala gloated over as their Union Day. On that U-day, he presented the 'bottle of death', sans his fingerprints, to Mala for 'celebrating' with her lover and his wife. When Mala said that Radha was 'no game for that', Pravar suggested that they might as well leave the dregs for her to rue later, and true to his word, he sought to implicate Radha by poisoning Shakeel's mind about her involvement in the double murder.

As Mala's death ended Pravar's emotional divide, so his passion for Natya came to rule his heart, and being bolder for the double murder, he plotted to kill Rajan to usurp his woman, and waited for the opportunity, which presented itself soon enough. That midnight, the three of them were at a secluded spot in Shamirpet to collect the ransom from a businessman, whose kid they kidnapped the day before. While Rajan and Pravar waited for the father at the agreed place, Natya stayed in the background holding the kid; when the dad came with the ransom, Pravar went to Natya to fetch the kid for barter. On their way back with the booty, Pravar shot Rajan dead and to mislead Natya, he fired from his as well as Rajan's revolver to fake an encounter, which the police made out to be a real thing to score a few Brownie points of 'law and order'.

Having thus gained an entry into Natya's hapless life, Pravar doled out from the booty to worm his way into her enamored heart. After their marriage, though she wanted him to give up his bad ways, as he was too far down the road of crime; she had no choice but to keep pace with him. While he planned to kidnap Kavya, wiser for the hazards a secluded place posed in collecting the ransom, he conceived the ingenuous rendezvous on the Tank Bund. What with Natya playing her part to perfection, they almost pulled it off, but only almost. While Dhruva's genius spoiled the party for Pravar, Natya gave the slip to Shakeel when he went to nab her in their den.

When Shakeel ended the remarkable tale saying that he was confident of seeing Pravar on the gallows for the double murder, Dhruva said that any novice of a lawyer could induce the courts to set him free for want of evidence. However, when Dhruva said that Pravar was too dangerous to be left alone, Shakeel agreed to put him under constant scanner.

Victim of Trust

Next day, Dhruva woke up earlier than usual to Radha's thoughts, and sipping the bed-coffee in the portico, as he thought about the inimical twists and turns in her chequered life, he had a gut feeling that it was she, who came to see him the other day. What with his earlier fascination for the alleged murderess coming to the fore again, he was seized with an urge to see her. While he was lost in his thoughts, as Dicey began to bark, he looked towards the gate, and seeing a fascinating dame, he seemingly lost his heart to her, but bitten once, even as she approached him seductively he subdued himself. Just the same, when she introduced herself as Radha, he couldn't resist holding out his hand to her, but as she offered her services to him, he wanted to have her resume, before he made up his mind.

Radha was the only child of her parents, who pampered her much beyond their middle-class means. She was rather studious and methodical and even excelled at her studies that is relatively speaking, and to the delight of his parents, she was on expected academic course to be a Chartered Accountant. However, when she crossed eighteen, her life went awry, as she lost her heart to a newcomer in their locality, whose identity she preferred not to reveal, as the world was small after all. What with love ruling her head, she failed to apply her mind at her studies to end up at the bottom of the class, and her father, who entertained visions of seeing her in the 'Brahmaiah' mould, was aghast at her poor showing. When he wanted her to explain her low scores, she spilled the beans, and that left him with no choice but to approach her lover's father, who roundly condemned her for enticing his gullible son and outraged by the slur, her father prohibited her from meeting her lover any more.

However, as her lover assured her that he would prevail over his father, blinded by love, she carried on with him on the sly, but as her escapades came to her father's notice, he restricted her movements, and started looking for a suitable boy for her. While the prospect of her marriage with another alarmed her, and as her lover too was averse to losing her, they eloped, when she was barely nineteen. While that made her scandalized parents disown her, her lover's parents were engaged in weaning their son away from her.

Her lover's will to stick to her through thick and thin began to wane as he came to wilt under the emotional blackmail of his parents, which forced her to remind him of his own vows never to part with her. When she was thus hard-pressed to hold her lover, his father upped the ante by pitting his son's mediocre life with her against the rosy future as the son-in-law of a well-heeled man with a vivacious daughter. While the parent-induced insecurity played upon his mind and the envisaged beauty of the bride-to-be blunted her own charms in his vision, her lover came to perceive her as a source of his own undoing. As if the prospect of losing her lover was not nightmarish enough, she missed her periods, regardless of which, he chose to desert her, and that sealed her fate. Left in the lurch, as she burnt her bridges with her parents, so she thought, she in desperation, tried to contact her childhood friend, her full-soul mate her half-namesake, as she put it.

Seeing a twitch on Dhruva's brow then, Radha felt that some namesake of hers might have stirred his heart before, while he, staring at her, wondered what if she were to be as soulless as her half-namesake who had just then jilted him.

When she learned that her friend, having married in the meantime, moved out of town by then, Radha recapped her life and times; she had to turn to an elderly neighbor to help her find a job. But as he tried to snare her into being his keep, which made her realize the pitfalls of a single woman in the man's world, swallowing her pride, she, a prodigal daughter, approached her parents, who took her back into their fold. As she was keen to bear her child, which proposition her mother supported, her father had to find a groom for her on a war footing, and that brought Madhu, an Engineer in the Civil Works Department, into her life.

While Madhu jumped at the prospect of marrying her, as she found him not to her liking, she dragged her feet, but her father asked her to choose between aborting her child and marrying the Engineer. With the lurking danger the bulging belly posed, she bowed her head to let Madhu tie the knot and he, blinded by his adoration for her, not only turned blind to her reticence in the bed but also failed to grasp the import of the early arrival of her son, Raghu. While she doted upon her son, more out of a

sense of guilt than any affection for the man who fathered him, Madhu was never enamored of him though not out of suspicion.

However, it took the seven-year itch for Madhu to get wind of her conjugal indifference towards him, and that hurt his ego and crushed his heart. She always knew that she had to involve her body and mind to save the nuptial tie, and yet she couldn't bring herself around to obey the dictates of cohabitation. Maybe vexed with her cold embrace, Madhu sought to pep up his sex-life with call girls, whom his bribe money fetched in their scores, and even as she thought that life couldn't get worse than that, fate had other indignities in store for her.

When Madhu's assistant died in an accident, Mala, as his childless widow, with a brother to support, got a job in the department on compassionate grounds, he lost no time in ingratiating himself with her as a neglected husband, deprived of woman's affections and all. Succumbing to his falsity, owe be to the vulnerable woman, Mala agreed to become his mistress, to be set up in a *chinnillu* and supported by his *vasool* money. While Madhu lavished his attention on Mala, as if to add insult to the injury, he used force Raghu to run errands for her, and when Radha chided him for reducing his own son as a valet of his mistress; he implied that she herself being so cold to him; her boy, for all he knew, could be a bastard.

Worried about her boy's future in that setting, when she raked her brains to save him, she thought of his biological father, who so cruelly ditched her to hitchhike with a moneyed dame. However mean he might have been, she thought, won't he come to his boy's rescue by putting him in some boarding school? So she tried to locate him, more out of desperation than in hope, for she knew how mean he was. When she managed to find him, though after a long haul, as she pictured their son's plight, he painted himself as a lovelorn, paying the price for his betrayal in his wife's cold bed, which left him childless in that marriage. As that triggered her innate empathy she has had for him, and with no love lost for her spouse; she had no qualms in bedding with him, though in the hope of propping up their son.

At the end of a weeklong rendezvous in which he overwhelmed her with his passion, she set aside her past bitterness and asked him to take her as his second wife to give their son his due. But lo, the bastard made her feel ashamed of herself; what cruelty to say that she was a first grade *maal* all right, but she should've known that even for a second wife, he wouldn't have a third grade slut. Slighted though, she swallowed her pride and tried to impress upon him about his obligations to his own offspring, but he inflicted the cruelest cut on her body soul - if she could recall correctly, why she never forgot his words, he told her that the plight of a bastard was not something for him to lose sleep over. When she retorted, what if she told his wife about his past, he warned her that she might as well forget about her future whatever little it might have held for her, as he would engage a *supari* to eliminate her without anyone ever getting wiser about it. How disgusted she was with the man she once loved and compromised with again, she only knew.

However, things came to a head when Raghu questioned Madhu as to how he could reduce his own son as an errand boy of his mistress, he callously retorted what proof he had of his own paternity, and rubbed salt on his paternal wound with the adage that maternity was a fact but paternity was only a faith. Given Raghu's premature birth, he said that he didn't think that he was indeed his father, and unable to bear the humiliation, her boy committed suicide on the railway track. Madhu though saw in the tragedy an opportunity to slight her further, and so he began bringing Mala home, as a prelude to a *ménage a trios*, as he put it.

But Radha decided to call a spade a spade, and sought divorce, to which, he was averse, as his sexual interest in her had resurged, as a byproduct of his passion for his mistress. Moreover, adding insult to injury, he said that not counting alimony; a house maid could be more expensive than a wife, but as she refused his demands for threesome orgies, he further debased himself as a wife-beater.

When Radha was all set to press for divorce regardless, tragedy struck her that fateful day; as he tried to force her to have a drink with him and his mistress, as she refused to oblige, he necked her out of the house in a fit of rage, forcing her to turn to a friend for a shelter as her parents were dead and gone by then. When a neighbor called her the next day to tell her that Madhu and Mala died of poisoning and the police were on the look out for her, she rushed to the police station to clear her name, but to be locked-up as the main suspect. How Shakeel the inspector on duty had abused her, she only knew, oh, what a diabolical character he was!

Though Shakeel failed to book the real culprit to date, she always had a hunch that Pravar, the *awara* brother of Mala, would have been the killer, and so with a little detective work, she gathered that he became an object of ridicule because of his sibling's conduct and all taunted him on that score. While that could be a motive for him to murder the illicit couple, he had a criminal background to boot, though not on the scale that Shakeel tried to picture on the TV screens. Well, it smelled something fishy really; whatever, she knew that the poisoned drink the couple drank to their death was a present from Pravar for their cherished occasion, and as she was going through an old issue of *Eenadu* that she missed earlier, coming across Dhruva's ad, she turned hopeful.

Finishing her tale of woes and looking into his eyes directly, she said enticingly that she hoped that at last, her hope won't turn out to be a dupe after all, and that he would set things right for her while she herself assisted him in his endeavors.

As her version matched Pravar's account, Dhruva felt it was indeed a poetic justice that Pravar, who tried to implicate her in a murder she didn't commit, found himself in the dock for a crime that he had nothing to do with. Besides, he felt that her account of her lover illustrated that love and lust alike are manifestations of sexuality in that while love begets affection through sexual union, lust might remain barren in spite of sexual fulfillment.

While she looked at him in hope, he asked her what she thought could have been behind her lover's refusal to part with a penny being in a position to do so; she said that in hindsight it was clear to her that besides being a mean-being, he was money-minded as well. Whatever, the way he used and reused a trusting woman, wouldn't that make him a regular bastard after all?

When Dhruva extended his hand to her in anticipation, as Radha held it a little longer before releasing, he recalled Ranjit's Rupees twenty-thousand gesture against the promised million Rupee bonanza.

Backyard of Life

When Radha reported for work the next day, Dhruva led her into his study to throw open his collection of Holmes, Mason et al for her to pore over them, and as she was engrossed with the former, Raju went up to her to usher her to join his master at

the dining table. When she approached him with the lunchbox she brought along with her, as Dhruva said that the perquisites included free lunches, smiling coyly, she said that she would not mind working extra time if she could have dinners as well.

As Radha came to spend long hours at 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva lost no time in initiating her to drinks with Gin and Thums Up. When he asked her if his smoking a cigar was a bother for her, she said that having savored the smell of *pogaku* in his breath, she was all-eager to have a feel of its smoke. As he lit his *lanka*, maintaining that she enjoyed its aroma, she wondered whether he could make rings out of its smoke, the way actor Pran does in the movies. When he showed his prowess at it, as she wanted an encore, he too goaded her to repeat her booze; as he mixed a drink for her, she said that but for her abstinence then, her fate would have been tied up with the illicit couple and added that to usurp Madhu's ill-gotten wealth, Pravar might have aimed at killing three birds at one shot.

What with Radha's seductive balm soothing his jilted wound, and her eagerness to come closer to him tripping his resolve to be tightlipped until he sized her up, Dhruva appraised her how Pravar was fixed in the counterfeits case. When she said that maybe the dubious means justified the desirable end, he told her that Pravar had already confessed to the cop about his dubious role in the double murder. Saying she was glad to hear that, she said cheers all again, and clinking her glass with his own, he told her that he saw a possible role for her in dealing with the peculiar challenges Kavya's release from Pravar's psychological hold posed.

By the time Raju was ready to serve them dinner, Radha had a drink too many, and as Dhruva led her to the dining table by her waist, he was struck by her silken skin. After a sumptuous dinner, when she said that she would like to go home, he suggested that she better stayed back for the night, at which she turned coy and said that it might be risky. When he said that though a ladies' man, yet he was a gentleman, having had a hearty laugh she said that it was about the risk he ran. Meeting his flummoxed look, she lowered her eyelids and said that she heard that a man lets a woman into his house only as a prelude to letting her into his heart. Elated at her unexpected advance, as he said that he who would shy away from such a welcome prospect, she coyly reminded him about the proverbial camel that took over the tent when it was allowed to cool its head. Saying that his heart and hearth were too big for any to fill them, he cajolingly led her into Mithya's room, and as he helped her onto the mahogany cot, she pulled him into her embrace to anoint herself as the reigning queen of 9, Castle Hills.

Heralding a new phase in Dhruva's life, as Radha served him bed coffee; he caught her hand and said that she was hotter than the steamy thing. Saying coyly that she knew his ardor would keep her ever warm, she watched him joyously as he savored the strong coffee, and when he took her into his arms, she sank into him amorously.

After breakfast though, she went to her place along with him to fetch her wardrobe as a prelude to let her transport herself into his life. Feeling at home in their home and seeing him eating her preparations greedily at lunch, she said coquettishly that she had some dessert to serve as well; while he played innocent, she pushed him all the way to Mithya's room that she made her own.

Breaking up his siesta before her, he went into the study to check the mail, and began reading a letter in Rani's hand that read.

Dear deadly:

Your boy is growing up in me, and it is no blackmail. As I thought he would, my man came around. If I were to be widowed when I still have it in me, you can count on my availability, and God forbid, should fate orphan our boy, I hope the gates of 9, Castle Hills are ever open for him. But for now, your fears about Kavya were not fated to be liars for I heard that she is carrying on with Pravar.

Love,

You know who.

Securing the letter in the chest of drawers, he didn't fail to see the irony of his only progeny forever remaining anonymous to him, and as Kavya's fall began to trouble him, he had a premonition that her life might induce her to afford him an opportunity to redress his guilt.

When Radha came to serve him some steamy tea, as he was still morose, she said playfully that she was disappointed that even her nascent persona was of no avail to enliven him, and as he took her into his arms, as if to underscore her position in his life, she told him gravely that not all his virility would help her as she underwent hysterectomy, and added, in jest, that she wondered how he yet failed to father Mithya's child. He said that Mithya had had a couple of miscarriages, but when she wanted to know more about her life, he said that she would have that by and by. She said in half-jest that even as she waited for a peep into Mithya's past, what if he took her to the backyard of his life, he led her there, saying mockingly that it was no Garden of Eden.

Possibly a lovechild, he was abandoned at the gates of an orphanage in Devarakadra, and an ayah there named him Dhruva for she felt that he shone like the North star. When it was time to put him into school, since none knew his surname, the headmaster entered the village name in the column, and as he showed his prowess at catching the kitchenware- thieves at the orphanage and retrieving the 'lost' pencils from the wrong boxes at the school, he became Detective Dhruva to all. Thanks to a Good Samaritan, who funded his higher education, he graduated in humanities and joined the police department to have a hands-on-experience in dealing with crimes.

While his ignorance about his caste and creed made him blissfully immune to pride and prejudice, the deprivation of parental love and family ties left him with no emotional baggage to carry. Maybe to retrieve the lost ground of affection, he coveted women's love and so courted the desirable with some luck in between. Though he made a mark at his work, owing to his lacking a caste identity, none knocked at his door to invite him to lead their daughter to the altar. Thanks to the women who fancied him, he didn't miss much, to talk about which to a woman may not be chivalrous for a man; though all that changed when Mithya came into his life, her death brought him back to square one.

Cuckoo's Nest

As Raju announced Ranjit's arrival, Dhruva said jocularly that Radha might as well meet Mr. Interval, but she told him that it pays to retain his Ace of Hearts for the development implied that the stakes were raised. Leaving her with a pleased look, Dhruva reached the study to find a downcast Ranjit, who said that Kavya had come under Pravar's spell, and sadly, he had every reason

to believe that she was carrying on with him. As Ranjit bemoaned how his upright wife chose to have an affair with a hardened criminal, Dhruva said that he should bear with it all till she got over her aberration induced by the 'Stockholm Syndrome'. Assuming the role of a psychiatrist, the detective tried to convince the cuckold that he should be considerate to his unfortunate wife, while he himself would strain every nerve to get her out of her paramour's emotional clutches.

While Dhruva was closeted with Ranjit in the study, Radha went about arranging her things in Mithya's room and found the main cupboard ajar. Wondering whether it was Dhruva's idea to let her gain access to Mithya's wear, she opened it and came across scores of embroidered saris in an impressive wardrobe. Unable to resist the temptation to find out how Mithya's blouses would go on her, she wore one and as it was well-suited, she wore a matching sari, and reached for the full-length mirror. While she sized up herself in Mithya's attire, she tried to envision Dhruva's reaction, which gave her a strange sense of fetishism, and drawn by the amazing collection of saris and dresses lying in the cupboard, one by one, she pulled them out, and found at the bottom, a false bottom. Gaining access to the secret shelf, and overawed by the exquisite jewelry lying therein, in ornate boxes, she couldn't stop wondering about the quality of the gems and the beauty of the workmanship. And finding a framed picture of a young girl, who seemed to be Mithya's daughter, she could not help but compare it with Mithya's life-size picture of on the wall, and felt that both exuded a charm of their own.

When Raju informed her about Ranjit's departure, she joined Dhruva in the study, and he briefed her about Kavya's affair with Pravar, at which she wondered at the ways of life, and said that it could be awful for the husband. While Dhruva was at a loss as to how to redeem himself by freeing Kavya from Pravar's hold before she became his crime-mate as well, Radha said that they should bring Natya into play to gauge Kavya's mind, and that would enable her to keep a vigil on Pravar her own *bête noir*. Agreeing that they should think of a ploy to bring Natya emotionally closer to her, they toyed with many an idea before he came up with a plan involving Shakeel. While he was calling up Shakeel, she said jocularly that he should summon an ambulance as the cop might suffer a stroke on account of her presence at the Castle Hills; patting her for her naughtiness, he said that he would ask the cop to come in an ambulance.

When Shakeel came as promised, she received him in the portico as planned and before the guest could recover from the shock of her presence, the host jolted him further by introducing her as his assistant in a live-in. Leading Shakeel into the drawing hall, Dhruva joked that it made sense that the cop made up with her as his future admissions into 9, Castle Hills have to be through proper channel. When Radha extended her hand to Shakeel saying that they let bygones be bygones, Dhruva goaded him to make a new beginning with his old suspect. Over drinks that they had together, as she showed no traces of bitterness towards him, Shakeel began to feel at ease, and when Dhruva stressed upon the need to involve her in pinning Pravar, he ended up befriending her. As Dhruva finished the blueprint to bring Radha and Natya together, Shakeel left them wondering how his premonition about her coming closer to Dhruva came true.

That day, when Natya was about to step out from the department stores in the A.C. Guards; a woman constable picked her up for alleged shoplifting and packed her off to the lock-up of Saifabad police station. Soon, Natya had Radha for company, supposedly locked up for her road rage, and as Radha feigned to take Shakeel to task for having booked her for nuts, impressed with her élan Natya was drawn towards her. As Radha rang up Dhruva to speak to Shakeel, Natya pleaded with her to take up

her case as well and as the older woman obliged. Readily freed by Shakeel, Radha led Natya to her own Red Hills abode, kept under lock and key, and succeeded in cultivating her young heart; as expected Natya spilled the beans on her wayward life and Radha solicited her about the need to reform Pravar for her own well-being. As Radha convinced Natya about the need to keep Pravar out of the loop as they together worked towards that end, the latter swore that she would act as directed.

‘Untried’ Crime

On reaching her ‘new home’ as she learned that Dhruva was away with Shakeel and was not expected till late in the night, Radha began scanning Mithya’s closets to delve deeper into her past. Not finding any sleazy stuff therein, as she was on the verge of giving up on spying, she located a false bottom in the dressing table that led her to many unusual items. Elated at the discovery as she rummaged the shelf, she found Mithya’s jottings, leafing through which she came across a handwritten *Untried Crime* that read:

“That was when Mithya’s life was under siege; she faced the unwelcome prospect of divorce, lo, owing to her own infidelity. Barely turned twenty-eight, as she was not for losing the good things of life her marriage afforded, she began planning a perfect murder of her man and her paramour. Leaving no loose ends for the police to tie her up to the murders, wearing a *burka* she spied upon Dhruva, the Station House Officer, likely to come knocking at her door for the inevitable questioning. While his reputation as an Ace of crime detection only increased her sense of challenge, giving an erotic edge to her criminal cunning, she turned covetous struck by his élan and enamored of his mien.

That late night, after seeing the end of both her men and having alerted the police about their death, she expectantly waited for Dhruva at her 9, Castle Hills, and when he knocked at her door, she received him in lingerie.

“Sorry for my rather scanty cladding,” she said alluringly.

“I’m Inspector Dhruva,” he said unable to take his eyes off her hourglass frame.

“I’m Mithya,” she said coquettishly, extending her hand invitingly.

“Mrs. Ashok I suppose,” he said, grabbing it greedily.

“Yes, I’m Mithya Ashok,” she said withdrawing from him.

“Do you know where Mr. Ashok is now?”

“Aboard the Godavari Express,” she said, “on the way to Waltair.”

“Are you sure?”

“You know I’m his wife, don’t you?”

“Can’t there be secrets between spouses?”

“Have you come to know of any mistress of his?” she said mockingly.

“Maybe he would’ve been better off in her bed, if he had any but....”

“You mean, better off than in mine?” she said interrupting him

“I’ve to get into both to know about that,” he said naughtily, “but sadly he’s no more.”

“If it’s the case,” she said winking at him, “can’t you imagine the possibilities?”

“It’s no joke, he was possibly murdered,” he said searching into her eyes.

“You mean, in the running train!”

“No, it’s in your A.C Guards’ house.”

“Wonder how he landed there!” she said feigning surprise. “But who could have killed him?”

“Who’s Dilip?”

“He’s my errand boy, don’t mind his age,” she said smilingly.

“Is that all?”

“I know privacy is the first casualty in crime investigation.”

“Don’t mistake me, it’s a routine question.”

“To tell you the truth, I am carrying on with him.”

“I don’t think he’s of your class.”

“Why that should bother you at all?”

“But surely your man would’ve been concerned about it.”

“You are spot on,” she said taking his hand. “You may know that I offered to divorce him.”

“Are you in love with Dilip?”

“Didn’t you hear me say that I am carrying on with him?”

“When did you last see him?”

“Last night, we were together till ten.”

“Where it was?”

“Where Ashok was murdered that’s going by what you’ve said.”

“You mean you three were there.”

“Are you implying a threesome or what?”

“You know I am not privy to your sexual proclivities.”

“Given a chance, I won’t withhold any from you,” she said seductively.

“You may keep that on hold and...”

“As you put me on hold, I can hang on in hope,” she said turning bold.

“Maybe by the rope,” he said mocking sympathy.

“Don’t worry on that count.”

“Misplaced though, your confidence is admirable.”

“Cerebral though isn’t it a misplaced compliment,” she said coyly adjusting her lingerie.

“Could be but how Ashok was in the wrong place?”

“How am I to know that?”

“Maybe you could guess.”

“I’ve no clue on earth.”

“What if Dilip too is dead.”

“Oh God, did they kill each other?”

“I haven’t said Dilip was dead,” he said and as she was startled a little, he added, “didn’t you give away the clue to the case?”

“Brush up your grammar boy, it was but my question,” she said recovering.

“Then, ‘yes’ is my answer,” he said bowled by her smartness.

“Oh, losing my man and my paramour.”

“What a double jeopardy, I’m really sorry.”

“Why be sorry as I’m doubly free,” she said taking his hand.

“I guess you’ve some way to go before that,” he said holding it.

“Going by your demeanor, I don’t think so.”

“Why not follow me there?”

“Can’t you spare me all that now?”

“So be it but don’t fail to turn up at the mortuary tomorrow.”

“Where it is?”

“Sorry for the slip.”

“Don’t I see you’re enamored,” she said winking at him.

“I will wait for you at the Gandhi Hospital at ten in the morning,” he said in embarrassment.

“Thank you for being a considerate cop.”

“Maybe you could’ve revealed more.”

“How unfair to say that without giving any scope for that?” she said feigning to be offended.

“You’re impossible; see you at ten in the morning.”

While she waved at him amorously, perplexed at her audacity and perturbed by his attraction, he left her half-heartedly.

‘Stabbed in the abdomen, as Ashok lay dead in the sofa, how it was that Dilip’s medulla oblongata hit the edge of the chair opposite!’ Dhruva began reviewing the murder scene on his way home. ‘Won’t the empty Bagpiper bottle, broken glasses and the scattered *bhujjiya* indicate a drinking brawl, possibly over Mithya that led to their killing each other? But was it as simple as that? Was there Mithya’s hidden hand behind all that? Why not take her finger prints?’

The next day as Mithya reached the mortuary, Dhruva obliged her to leave her finger prints, having which, he was lost in the elegance of her slender fingers that was not lost on her; pleased with herself she turned coquettish and said how she wished that he would let her put them for better use in time. Distracted though by her seductive ways, yet he was able to discern that her demeanor turned cold as she saw Dilip’s body, and that she looked contemptuously at Ashok’s corpse, which made him think that she had no love lost for either of them. Moreover, when he noticed the steadiness of her hand as she recorded her statement and the coolness in her face as she was all set to take away Ashok’s body in the ambulance, he felt that she had the nerve of a killer. When she told enticingly that she knew he would visit her again in *vardi* but he was welcome even in *mufti*, he

was amazed as well as irritated by her audacity. While getting into her sedan that followed the ambulance as she winked at him invitingly, seeing in her a *femme fatale* of the first order, he waved her off wondering whether she was the murderess after all; and as if to chase his thoughts, leaving the chores of handling Dilip's body to Appa Rao his deputy, Dhruva headed straight to the forensic laboratory.

The post-mortem report confirmed the instantaneous deaths of both men and Mithya's fingerprints were found all over the place and that put Dhruva in the contemplative mode: 'Stabbed in the abdomen by Dilip if Ashok died instantaneously, how he could have pushed away Dilip with such a force that his medulla oblongata took the hit? Even assuming Ashok had extraordinary reflexes, still as he was pushed out, Dilip's grip on the knife would have ensured that it was pulled out of Ashok's frame, which was not the case. Were it possibly that Mithya murdered Dilip in cold blood after abetting him to stab Ashok to death? Was not the informer an anonymous woman! Was it all Mithya's handiwork?'

Soon after Ashok's obsequies were over, Dhruva called on Mithya at 9, Castle Hills.

"What brings you here man?" she greeted him heartily.

"Why can't you guess?"

"Where the need as your urgency shows?" she said winking at him.

"You are mistaken," he said, hiding his embarrassment.

"Oh! I thought you are a game," she said, feigning disappointment.

"You may know that custodial interrogation is a different ball game," he said assuming a grave demeanor.

"Then you have to go to hell to interrogate both of them?" she said smilingly and ushering him into her house.

"Not a bad idea if a *femme fatale* can lead me there."

"If you think I'm one, I would lead you to heaven instead," she said enticingly.

"Tempting though..."

"What's the hesitation?" she said moving closer.

"Thanks to your finger prints on the murder weapon, I may be forced to lead you elsewhere," he said dramatically taking her hand.

"What a discovery!" she said without taking her hand out of his. "Why, it was I who prepared the salad besides mixing drinks for Dilip and me. Wonder how you had missed my finger prints on the Bagpiper bottle and those two glasses."

"Where went the third glass?" he said releasing her hand.

"I haven't heard of two drinking out of three glasses, have you?"

"But Ashok's viscera showed that he too drank."

"Don't you see that scoring for me?" she said triumphantly. "Won't that prove that they brawled themselves to death after drinking to the dregs?"

"When Ashok died readily, who could've killed Dilip?" he said with a probing look.

"I know Ashok has quick reflexes," she said with a poker face, "possibly he might've pushed away Dilip before he died."

"Why wouldn't have Dilip pulled out the knife when pushed?"

“It’s puzzling isn’t it?” she said smilingly.

“What if someone was there to ensure that both died?”

“Eminently possible, but don’t you think it’s too thin a thread to hang me with?” she said mockingly.

“Could the criminal and the informer be the same?”

“We could discuss all that and more if you stay on for dinner,” she said invitingly, taking his hand.

“Not now, maybe some other time,” he said making a move.

“You may know that you’re always welcome,” she said pressing his hand.

“Looks like you’re a tough nut to crack,” he said pressing her hand.

“Oh!” she feigned pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said releasing her hand.

“Isn’t it precious to hold,” she said extending her hand enticingly.

“That’s what is disturbing,” he said waving her goodbye.

“That’s the charm of life,” she said, blowing a kiss at him.

Bowled though by her charms as her daredevilry affronted his professional ego, hell-bent on pinning her down, he pored over the case for loopholes but to no avail, he thought that he should play ball with her in her own court.

That evening when Dhruva in *mufti* reached 9, Castle Hills, Mithya in light pink voile sari, was in the lawns with Dicey her new acquisition, and having greeted him heartily, she warmly led him into the drawing room only to flirt with him openly. Soon, as they had a binge of booze sitting together in that wide sofa, finding her at her evocative best, he realized how vulnerable he was to her peculiar persona. But as he remained tentative, teasing him at his unease, before cozying up to him by drawing closer to him, she revealed her riveting allures by degrees, and unable to resist her charms, as he conceded his erotic ground to her, she induced him to lay the foundations for an amorous edifice through necking and petting.

When she proposed dinner to let them satiate their palates as a prelude to satiating their personas, following her to the dining table, as he took to bottom pinching, she said coyly that she wouldn’t be granting him an out-of-turn favor. Saying that he would wait for its turn, yet as he busied himself at her bottom, she said that he could have his way both ways but as per protocol. After a hearty meal followed by pan, she led her into the lawn to let him puff away at his *cigar* as she enjoyed its aroma, and as he stubbed the butt, hugging him ardently and reaching for his lips, she kissed him fervently, inducing in him the urge to surge in. Leading him indoors, she stripped him in the drawing room and pulled him into the bedroom only to push him onto her sprawling mahogany bed for their erotic exertions.

When they lay there in satisfaction, she opened her mind to him.

“I know what brought you into my bed and as quid pro quo, I’ll satisfy your curiosity,” she said coyly. “It was Dilip’s idea to undo Ashok and I went along with it, not to acquire a rich widow tag, but to avoid the divorcee brand. With inputs from Dilip, I worked out a plan to slow-poison Ashok, as and when he embarked on a journey by train and as I was all set, it dawned on me that in all suspicious deaths, the spouse would readily come under the scanner, so I realized that to save my skin, I should get rid of Dilip as well. Moreover, eager to step into Ashok’s shoes, Dilip was getting too big for his boots, and to give a spin to

Ashok's death, before arranging that fateful meeting to untangle the love triangle, I booked a berth for him on the Godavari Express. The rest as you know is mystery."

"Isn't it a loss to the crime history?"

"Why not we together create history," she said invitingly. "It's my curiosity to measure up the cop who would turn up that made me appraise you on the sly; even as your looks surged my sexual passion, your manner induced a sense of belonging in me. Believe me; my urge to make a new beginning with you fuelled my desire to be freed of both of them even more; that way, my man, you are an abettor of the crime yourself. Whatever, breathing down my neck, you've charmed me with your mind as well, and now with your lovemaking, you've increased my craving for being your woman. You know, all this is for your ears only and not for my trial for sure; try acting funny and you stand accused - of torture and rape, why haven't you left enough evidence behind – on both counts."

"What to make of you?" he said in exasperated admiration.

"Yours if you please," she winked at him.

"What if you are let loose," he said contemplatively.

"Why not enslave me," she said as he got into the *mufti* in the drawing room.

"That's resisting the irresistible."

"If you can ignore my past, I won't let you regret making me your wife," she said pleadingly taking him in her embrace. "It's my promise."

"I know your value to my life but let me think it over," he said disarmingly.

"Won't you come tomorrow?" she said reaching for his lips.

"You haven't left me yet," he said reaching for his dress after she released him

"Let this be my keepsake of our first-time," she said, pulling out the tape recorder from his pocket.

"Oh, you are impossible!" he said taking her into his arms.

We became man and wife, and hope we will live happily ever after."

Amazed at what she read, Radha thought that Mithya could have been a temptress in the Cleopatra mold and wondered what would have happened had she poisoned her men.

Kavya's Quagmire

When Radha took Dhruva to cloud nine, as if to bring him back to mundane world, Dicey fell seriously ill; though he felt gratified to see her tending the pet like her own child, when it succumbed to the mysterious ailment in a week's time, he was truly downcast. While it took him quite a while to recover from his loss, courtesy Natya, Radha covered much of Pravar's crime ground into which Kavya had ventured.

After she got him bail, Kavya was wont to spend long hours with Pravar to prepare his defense. While he was charmed by her suaveness, she was sympathetic to his rustic ways, and believed that by putting up with him, she was only atoning herself for

Ranjit's foul on him. While Natya was all empathy for Kavya, for her sympathy for them, their proximity that exposed Kavya's allure to him made Pravar fantasize about the mature woman, and it was only time before he turned obsessive of possessing her, by means fair or foul. What with her empathy for him blinding her vision, Kavya mistook his advances as manifestations of his exaggerated gratitude for her, and Natya, though quick to sense his intentions, yet failed to caution her, for the fear of losing her support, all the while pleading with him not to scandalize their benefactor. Yet he wanted her to pander to Kavya, and as she refused, he threatened to end his life, which made Natya see the merit in the adage of 'yielding to the temptation as a way of avoiding it'. Reckoning that he would get over his passion for her rival only in her possession, Natya became his accomplice to drag Kavya into his bed.

Pravar faked suicide, ostensibly to save their benefactor from his passion for her, and Natya played upon Kavya's sympathy for him to try to woo her into his arms but Kavya, disturbed at the development and embarrassed to the core, was at a loss to know how to handle her unrequited love. Were she to shun him altogether, it would amount to her rescinding his *vakalat*, and with Shakeel braying for his blood, wouldn't that mean throwing him to the wolves? Why abandon him after all the hard work and on the verge of success? So she thought that she would put sense into his deranged head that it was not proper to covet a woman old enough to be his elder sister. While she strived to put sense into his head to put an end the nonsense, he reiterated his resolve to end his life if she were to fail to cater to his passion that was killing him any way.

Kavya saw no way out to save her honor but by cold-shouldering him in the hope that he would get over his obsession for her, and so kept away from him but no sooner, her unrelenting lover faked suicide yet again, she was thrown into a dilemma - if she gave in to him, she would be unfaithful to Ranjit, but should Pravar take the plunge, she would be the cause of his fall. What with her empathy for Pravar tilting the scales in the end, she could hold no more, and as he began to overwhelm her with all his passion, she felt as if her life was under siege in their liaison. Soon as Pravar tended to ignore Natya, Kavya insisted parity to make it an equitable love triangle, but with his ardency for her ever on the raise, he began pestering her to leave Ranjit to make it a *ménage a trois* for them.

While Dhruva blamed himself for Kavya's fall, as Radha felt the way to rescue her was to nab Pravar, he said that he would talk to Shakeel to lay a trap for him from which even Kavya would not be able to extricate him. Even as he reached for his mobile, Raju went up to them to tell that Shakeel, by then shifted to the Jubilee Hills police station, had come to see him.

When Dhruva, in tow with Radha, entered the study, Shakeel said that around six in the evening as Kavya informed him over phone that Ranjit lay dead in the master bedroom, he himself had rushed to *Spandan* to take stock of the situation. Kavya told him that Ranjit had left for his office at ten and, as was her wont, she too went out after lunch, but on her return, finding him dead in his bed in the master bedroom she felt it could be a cold-blooded murder. But he saw there was nothing amiss in the house and there were no injuries on the body, all of which pointed out to a possible heart attack, yet he had moved the body for post-mortem, and sounded his informers to pick up the grapevine.

While Dhruva became pensive, Radha said she knew it was coming; didn't Natya tell her that Pravar was hell-bent to have Kavya all for himself? Surely, Pravar, adept in the art of poisoning, would have done in Ranjit to gain Kavya's undivided affections. Dhruva told her not to jump the gun, as he could have committed suicide, unable to bear the ignominy of being a

cuckold, and for that matter, he might have died of heart attack, stressed as he was by his wife's infidelity. But as Radha insisted that it could have been Pravar's way of grabbing Kavya and her property as well, Dhruva maintained that time only would tell whether there was a foul play and they better waited for the post-mortem report.

Next evening, Shakeel came to tell Dhruva that the post-mortem report attributed the death to poisoning and that Kavya got an anticipatory bail for herself making him wonder whether she had a hand in the murder. Dhruva though thought that she was no fool to soil her hands with her husband's blood, as it won't be beyond her to know that she would be the prime suspect, given that she was having a paramour to boot. Radha maintained that it was apparent that Pravar, keeping Kavya in the dark, would have poisoned Ranjit, and it made sense to apprehend him forthwith for extracting his confession and be done with it.

Then Shakeel, as if as an afterthought, said that of late, whenever Kavya was away, a *burka*-clad woman was being seen visiting Ranjit, which made Dhruva say whether it was a woman in *burka* or women in *burka*. Shakeel said that he thought as much, but the neighbors were certain that it was only one woman that Ranjit was receiving for some time then. Radha said what if the woman in *burka* was Natya, Pravar's red herring to mislead the police; and Shakeel too felt that it was not a bad line of investigation. Dhruva though cautioned Shakeel not to oversimplify matters but wide-scan Ranjit's present and deep-delve into his past as his death by poisoning that pointed towards Pravar's hand raised the possibility of a hidden hand behind his murder.

Shakeel said that the foolhardiness of the criminal impulse always puzzled him but Dhruva reasoned that while the calling of the crime clouds reason, panic of the moment deserts caution, to let the culprits leave a damning clue for the law to catch up with them. What one would say about the credulity of a cuckold, who would have thrown caution to the winds by indulging in a drinking binge with his wife's paramour? Can any explain the stupidity of a philanderer who walks into the death trap laid for him by the man he has been cuckolding? How such dig their own graves!

While Shakeel wanted Dhruva to make it to crime scene along with him, Dhruva felt that his premature association would jeopardize their further involvement in it. While the cop saw merit in what the detective had said, as Radha insisted that their trip to *Spandan* might yield the keys to Pravar's tricks, Dhruva said that they better stayed on the sidelines as Shakeel kept the course. But after seeing Shakeel's back, as Radha wondered whether the cop was equal to the task, Dhruva hoped that by dawn, they might see the case in some fresh light; there could be something more than that met the eye.

Murders to Mislead

After Radha left Castle Hills to meet Natya, as Dhruva was wondering how Ranjit's death might have affected Kavya's relationship with Pravar, Raju informed him that a woman came to see him; irritated though about the intrusion into his reverie, he, nevertheless, headed towards the anteroom.

Seeing Kavya seated therein, even he was immobilized at the threshold, struck by his enamored demeanor, she stuck to her seat. When he walked up to her, as if out of trance, waking up to the reality, she got up in greeting, and as he gesticulated to be

seated, she reposted herself languidly. Sensing though the import of her visit and the possibilities it portended, yet he acquired a questioning look, and pulling out his call letter from her purse, she held it out to him.

Perusing it as a ruse to hide his excitement, he told her in the end that the job was hers for the asking, but she said that the purpose of her visit was to seek his assistance and not to assist him. While he feigned ignorance, outlining the circumstances that had brought her there, she sought his help in unraveling the mystery of her husband's death. He wanted to know if she had any suspect in mind, she said that if it were so, instead of coming to 9, Castle Hills, she would have gone to the Jubilee Hills police station. Bowled by her sense of humor, he said that he wished he had half her wit, and thanking him for the compliment, she returned it by adding that she knew he had enough of it to outwit Ranjit's killer.

As he was inclined to take her brief, she offered to take him to her place in her Alto, and reckoning that with her at the wheel, he would be able to assess her better, he went with her idea. On their drive to *Spandan* watching her closely all the way, he came to the view that her visage suggested that she was innocent, and as if reading his thoughts, she asked him if he really believed she was not involved as the cops thought she was. He said that though personally he believed she might not have had any hand in the murder, he would not be worth his salt as a detective if he took her at the face value. Pleased with his approach, she asked him if he cared to tell her about any intriguing murder that he might have solved, and he said that her query made him recall a case in cracking which Mithya, his late wife, played a crucial role. When she acquired a grave look for form's sake, he said that it was her sudden death a year back that prompted him to release that ad.

At that, Kavya wondered whether he would have selected her, even if she had called on him at the right time, he said that, if only she were inclined, time still beckoned her. While she kept quiet, as a prurient to his narrative, he asked her if she could recall the serial killings of wealthy middle-aged women in the Langar Hauz area that shook the Hyderabadis five years back. Nodding her head, she said that she followed the intriguing killings in the press thinking then that some psychopathic misogynist, jilted by a wealthy woman, might have been behind them, and added that she always wondered what came out the case, as it never came to be reported.

He said that Mithya preferred to view those mysterious murders from the kaleidoscope of illicit affairs and so moved into that area as Maya, the estranged wife of a wealthy man. When she befriended the gossiping housewives of the locality and as the response from them was on expected lines, soon she had drawn a list of cheating spouses, males and females alike, in that area. Since the resumes of the illicit couples that she presented hadn't revealed the nerves of a killer as he was not inclined to pursue that investigative course, she shifted gears to get acquainted with the abused women of the area, and came to know about Haritha a middle-aged widow and Ramya her young step-daughter, both of whom in some way were constrained by an unusual will and testament that was still talked about then.

Shortly before his death, the deceased had bequeathed his considerable wealth, lo, to the would-be-born children of Ramya, his five-year old daughter from his first wife and made Haritha, his childless second wife, her guardian with an entitlement to enjoy the property. Venting his apathy towards his young wife, he willed that she would be entitled for a meager maintenance once Ramya bore a child, but were she to die childless then an orphanage he named would benefit out of his wealth. Adding insult to his wife's injury, he conditioned his will, rather cruelly, that upon being widowed, were she to enter into a fresh nuptial,

she would cease to be the Ramya's guardian and all that goes with it. Well, as that will underscored mistrust and spelled malice, Mithya befriended Ramya, who in a moment of weakness made her privy to her intriguing life.

Widowed, at barely thirty, Haritha though seethed with a hapless rage at seeing the death-knell of a will, in time, to get even with the situation, she applied her mind to browbeat the imposition, and came up with an ingenious solution to bypass the will's proposition. She brainwashed Ramya, six then, about the need to have a male in the house for their protection, and got her married to Rahul, a sixteen-year old, whom she readily seduced to cater to her own sexual needs. But coming of age, when Ramya realized that her man was her stepmother's lover, she was at a loss to comprehend her position in her own house. Haritha, however, addressed the issue, so she thought, by letting Ramya consummate her marriage, when she was barely fourteen, but soon turning eager to have Rahul all for herself Ramya tried to wean him away from her stepmother's grip, but to no avail. But once Ramya's youth blossomed into womanhood that coincided with Haritha's weaning charms, as Rahul started leaning towards his wife, the peeved woman took to throwing tantrums at them to rob their newfound marital bliss. While that prompted Rahul to lean towards his wife even more, pushing the embittered woman out of the unethical love triangle altogether, Haritha, left out thus, turned even more cynical towards Ramya, which made her wonder how to get out of the ordeal.

When Dhruva said that was the clue for her, Kavya wondered what a hapless Ramya would have got to do with the serial killings; he said that Mithya thought that it could be Ramya's idea of killing some middle-aged women randomly, before they murdered Haritha. Ramya confessed that reckoned that unless caught in the act, none would ever suspect them of killing unacquainted women, and acting under the smokescreen of the serial killings, when they hit their target, the police would treat that as another episode of the same serial. When they were all ready to strike at Haritha, she was struck with terminal cancer; and Ramya felt remorse for killing those innocents.

Dhruva said in conclusion that as Mithya felt that Ramya, being the victim of the poison of abuse, deserved a fresh lease of life, he had agreed to put a lid on the case that the police had anyway closed as unsolved. Dhruva wanted to know how Kavya felt about it but she said that she was at a loss to form an opinion and as he averred that the discretion to arraign or not, lent charm of being a private detective, she told him that she hoped he would not abuse his privilege in the case on hand.

The Other Woman

When they reached *Spandan*, as Dhruva recalled his earlier rendezvous, Kavya gave him a free rein to scan her dwelling; as she ushered him into the master bedroom, unable to take his off at the wedding photograph on the wall, he said that she looked divine in her bridal attire but as she flung herself onto the bed sobbing, he apologized for his indiscretion, and she, affected by his empathy, was impelled to confide in him tearfully.

Ranjit was mean and selfish besides being secretive and so she could never bring herself to love him, but remained faithful to him until the wayward Pravar came into her life. During her captivity, she could discern the sublime side of Pravar's savage

nature as opposed to the selfish core of Ranjit's suave exterior. When Shakeel falsely implicated Pravar in a crime that he was not guilty of, her empathy for him prompted her to take up the cudgels on his behalf, which he mistook as a sign of her weakness for him, and sadly, she had to yield to him in spite of herself, and, what was worse, he began pestering her to divorce Ranjit. She had reasons to suspect that having got wind of her affair, to spite her, Ranjit had developed liaison with a woman and his mysterious death, besides adding to her guilt, made her even more vulnerable to Pravar's pressure. Oh, how her wayward ways undermined her orderly life, pushing her to the precipice of vice in the end.

Dhruva, affected by her misery, made her privy to the 'Stockholm Syndrome' and explained how she got herself into the mess. Shocked as well as relieved in the same vein as she clutched at his hand, he said why did not Ranjit, whom he had apprised about it, made her privy to it. Surprised, she asked him when it was and realizing the slip and wanting to avoid a premature disclosure; he said that it was when he came to seek his counseling on account of her affair. Pondering for a while, she pleaded with him to help her out of the psychic mess she got into, and he assured her that he had already made it his obsession; she said that her only hope was that he would help her out of Pravar's hold and clear the air off her in her husband's murder. Moved by her blind faith in him he said that he would go to lengths for her sake and gratified no end, she said that she believed he was the right man to set right her chaotic life. Hugging her lightly, he asked her what she thought about the possibility of Pravar having poisoned Ranjit and without withdrawing herself from his fold; she said that he had an alibi in her. He said what if Pravar had induced Natya, or hired some other woman, to do the job for him; she said mischievously that it was for him to delve into the matter.

Dhruva wanted to know who could be the woman in liaison with Ranjit and she said that though he knew that he received the other woman at home, when she herself was away, the woman always ensured that she never left any clues to her visits; her neighbors told her that she always came in a *burka*, and used to change it at every turn. Well, from the smell of the things in the house, she was certain that the same woman was with him before he was poisoned. He asked her why she didn't catch her man red-handed with that woman and she said that she felt she had no moral right to do so.

When Dhruva got up to leave, Kavya offered to drive him back to his place, but he said that though that would enable him more of her welcome company, yet he wouldn't want her to drive an extra meter on Hyderabad roads. Seeing him off at the gate, and espying him as he walked down the lane, she mulled over his words and felt that they conveyed his interest in her, as well as his concern for her. What with her self-worth getting a boost with his attentions, she craved to have more of the same, and as he turned his head towards her on his way, pleased with herself, she waved at him all the way.

Reaching home in an auto rickshaw as he briefed Radha about the developments on the Kavya front, Dhruva could notice a change of color in her demeanor, which he attributed to the feminine proclivity of sexual insecurity. While she sought to probe his mind, as he put the ball in her court with her 'Pravar might have used Natya to poison Ranjit' theory, she said that on second thoughts she was veering round to the view that it was the handiwork of Pravar in nexus with Kavya for they had the shared motive as well as the common means to commit the crime. Wanting to have something concrete than her conjecture, when he said that they better waited for Shakeel's report about Ranjit's past, she asked him to caution the cop as he might be high on Pravar's hit-list and added that Kavya too bore a grudge against him and thus can be expected to aid and abet the brat.

What with Radha bringing him back to square one, Dhruva wondered whether Kavya's confession was but a red herring, all the same seeing a need to extend the scope of the investigation beyond the known characters. He reckoned that when the ill motives of the natural suspects to commit a murder are an open secret, someone with a hidden agenda might be tempted to use that as a camouflage for his subterfuge.

Shakeel's Demise

That early dawn, waking up to the first ring tone of his mobile, so as not to disturb Radha lying beside him, Dhruva swathed it off readily, and moving out of the bedroom, he realized the call was from Shakeel's cell. As he was kept on hold for long when he returned the call, he dialed Shakeel's residential number he found it ever engaged; however, the stalemate ended as Shakeel's son got Dhruva on the mobile. Shocked at hearing that the cop had died in his sleep, Dhruva was dumbfounded, and recovering, he wondered whether he too went the Ranjit way. Changing into his formals in the bedroom, as he recalled Radha's fears for Shakeel's life, he instinctively looked at her; finding her in serene sleep, he told Raju to inform her about the development it as she woke up.

When Dhruva reached Shakeel's Chatrinaka home, he had to wade through the milling crowd to make it to the cop's corpse. While all thought that he could have died of a stroke, insisting for a post-mortem, as Dhruva began his investigation, it transpired that it was business as usual for him on the day of his death and that there was none to be suspected anyway.

On his return, as Dhruva aired his apprehensions about Shakeel's death to Radha, she voiced her suspicions about Pravar's possible involvement in it. What if Kavya is Pravar's next targets Kavya for she would have called it quits with him, so thought Dhruva; if it were Pravar who had seen Ranjit's end to own Kavya, would he let her go scot-free by ditching him? If he really avenged himself on Shakeel for foisting a false case on him, would he go soft on his ladylove for being hard on him? Sexual hurt was as compelling an impulse as any to commit crime, and Shakeel did sketch this fellow as cunning and ruthless. Well, why place the cart before the horse; let the post-mortem report arrive.

When the forensic tests confirmed Shakeel's death by poisoning, Dhruva was truly worried about Kavya's safety, and to have a word with her, he drove down to *Spandan*. Receiving him warmly and finding his enamored look flattering as well as embarrassing, Kavya became tentative, but as he succeeded in hiding his emotions she revealed to him that some cop came to enquire about her whereabouts the other day. As Dhruva wanted to have her take on the probability of Pravar avenging himself on Shakeel, she said that it was true that he was obsessed with the idea of revenge and she too used to urge him against it. After Ranjit's death as she turned cold towards him, he begged her not to desert him for he might go berserk all again, but sick and tired of her shameful liaison with him, she was firm not to yield to him come what may. Who knew, he could have killed the cop hoping that she would reach upto him to renew her counseling, so be it but there was no way she would succumb to him ever again.

While Dhruva stared at her with empathy, as she broke down, saying that she was miserable carrying the cross of her shameful past, he told her that if only she knew Pravar's true character, she would realize that he was not worth her thought any

more. As she looked at him with hope, he unraveled Pravar's criminal mind, etched by Radha and sketched by Shakeel, which prompted her to say that she felt wretched for having carried on with such a character. Moved by the radiance of her visage in her repentance, as he took her into his arms, driven by her sense of emptiness, she sank into him, and he told her that she better treated it all as a bad dream and forgot about it. Smug in his arms, as she confessed to him in remorse that she reduced herself to be Pravar's accomplice in crime as well, he said that was understandable; but shamed by her recollections, she withdrew herself, but goaded by him to off-load her guilt, she briefed him about her life and crimes with Pravar.

By the time he kidnapped her, having splurged all the booty in wooing Natya, he was already a broke, and with that farce of a ransom having ended in the confiscation of the stolen cars as well, he had nothing left to fall back upon. While he was content to live on her doles in the beginning, after he won her over, he came to seek more and more from her, but Ranjit, as if on cue, curtailed her access to the family purse, and that forced her to play ball with Pravar at extortions. Why, it was her idea that with right tactics, they could make the corrupt to part with part of their ill-gotten wealth, with none going to town about it. While he felt that they might conduct fake tax raids with forged identities, she reckoned that it would only land them behind the bars sooner than later as someone or the other was bound to call their bluff. When Pravar said what to make of her non-starter of an idea, she said that with her brains and his brawn, they could yet make it workable; with her contacts in the department, she would be able to prepare a list of tax evaders and profile their character for him to pick up the faint hearted from amongst them. Still if someone were to act out of character, yet there was no way he would go to the police to report against him, and if only he would keep his greed art bay, it might as well be a smooth sailing for him.

As if benumbed by shame, Kavya had paused for a while, but being aware of Dhruva's understanding, she resumed saying that her plan did work to her peculiar excitement, which made her realize that deep in her heart there could be a criminal beat after all. Dhruva patted her, as if to convey his empathy, and she said that she was ashamed of the darker side of her nature that came to the fore then; but as he reached out for her hand, she ran inside in despair, and he stayed back to let her overcome her grief in solitude.

But smelling gas and rushing into the kitchen, as he saw her picking up the gas-lighter, he grabbed and closed the cylinder valve; crying, she fell into his arms but as he led her to the verandah for fresh air, she withdrew from him in self-remorse. While he was at a loss to understand as to how to calm her, she told him that she could not bear the thought of life with a foul soul in a polluted body. Taken aback at her self-pity, he pleaded with her not to feel so low and told that it was only time before she regained her self-worth; she looked at him in hope and he offered to take her to his place, where with the Rajus in attendance, she would have Radha for company. Thanking him profusely as she hesitated to agree, as if to show her the way, he took her hand, and cajoled by him, she packed up some essentials.

When Dhruva reached home with Kavya, Radha knew she had a rival to contend with, but thought it might not help her cause, if she were to cut up with him on that count; but as he pondered over Kavya's predicament with her, she said that she saw an unmistakable linkage between both the murders. Before she could elaborate upon her theory, he received a call informing him that the day he died Shakeel was with a woman in *burka*. As Dhruva shared that news with her, she said that it

could have been a case of Pravar's poison at work under Kavya's *burka*, why, she had Natya's word that Kavya lost her soul to Pravar, and reduced herself as his vassal.

Cautioning her against jumping to conclusions, he said that it was not wise to go by Natya's words for she could have a grouse against Kavya, and added that she should learn from her own experience. Wasn't it Shakeel's over-reliance on Pravar's version that caused her so much grief, why repeat the mistake to Kavya's hurt? She reminded him how Kavya had given a clean chit to her paramour in her husband's murder and said that it was for him to decide whether she was feigning remorse over her liaison with him. Were it not possible that Kavya's suicide attempt was fake, *a la Pravar*, to gain his sympathy, and, for all she knew, it could be a ruse to divert his attention away from Pravar and herself.

But as he maintained that his gut feeling was that Kavya was innocent, and her change of heart was for the real, she said, in jest, that his fondness for desirable women tended to fudge his judgment about them. Making light of her remark, he said that she was free to keep a watch on her suspect, and she told him smilingly that it would be better for her if he kept his eyes off the charming guest; as he came up with a repartee that she had herself blinded him, she retorted by saying that what if her rival's attributes acted as lasers.

A Perfect Murder

Helped by Dhruva's counseling in his ambient dwelling, as Kavya recovered from her trauma sooner than expected, she wished to go back to her place, but he said that he was not so naïve as to put his client's life at risk. Radha chipped in saying that until the venom behind the poison was identified, it was better that Kavya stayed away from *Spandan*. As Radha added jokingly that she might deem it as a protective custody; Kavya said in half jest that she would like to earn her freedom by lending them her helping hand at catching the culprit. Bemused by their bonhomie, as he told Kavya that in the normal course she should have been senior to Radha; she said that she bore no grudge against her mate on that score. Meaning business, as Dhruva wanted Kavya to gather Ranjit's past, she said that she would have a lot of ground to cover, for her in-laws were ever on the move, until they died four years back. While he felt that probing his immediate past might save much of that bother, as the impulse of a recent hurt would have a stronger urge for revenge, Kavya said that as she has a hunch that Ranjit's premarital past might hold the key, it was as well that she delved into his distant past.

So in search of Ranjit's past, as Kavya left for Guntur, where he stayed when they got married, Radha told Dhruva that Natya feared the worst as Pravar was mad at the loss of his ladylove. She said that as the poor Natya bore the brunt of his frustration, the vengeful Pravar could be expected to avenge himself on Kavya sooner than later; what was worse, he might force Natya to be an accomplice in the crime. It's sad that Natya should have first fallen into Rajan's criminal hands only to end up in Pravar's vicious grip; how she wants that she could help her get out of the rut and put her under his care. Recalling the empathy Natya had induced in him that evening on the Tank Bund, as Dhruva told Radha that he would strive to end the Pravar menace, she said that she would love to see him effect a course correction in Natya life as he

brought Kavya's derailed life back on tracks. She said as and when that happens, Natya could be a redeemed soul and he felt that it would be possible only when Pravar was booked for some foul of his, but given that Ranjit's killer was at large, as Kavya's life could be imperiled, they should address that above all else.

She wanted to know whether Ranjit's murder could be a perfect murder and he said that he was not sure about that yet, but to her poser 'what's a perfect murder', he theorized that if the combined weight of irrefutable motive for committing the crime and its inalienable fruits of gain fail to nail the suspect, circumstantial evidence notwithstanding, it's a perfect murder. As she whether it was possible, he detailed the plan and execution of a murder that was conceptually perfect.

He was the S.H.O of Saifabad police station, when young Neha came to report that Murali, her alcoholic husband, did not return home last night, and so she was worried whether something untoward had happened. He asked her whether she knew anyone could be inimical to her husband, she said sobbingly that he was his worst enemy; pressed by him further, she said that burdened by debts as he wound up his automobile business, he became a cynic, and, somehow, he convinced himself that a poor man's wife was rich men's plunder. So, suspecting her fidelity, he began alleging that she slept with all and sundry, and unable to bear the humiliation, she tried to commit suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills, but sadly for her, he only saved her in the nick of the moment. Maybe rattled by the incident, he developed self-pity and started talking in terms of ending his own life, and it was his psychological imbalance and the hazards of drunken driving that worried her. Dhruva enquired if she had brought Murali's photograph along with her and she gave one for his reference and record.

While Dhruva was on his job to locate the missing person, Neha came to inform him the next day that Murali had returned but was depressed more than ever though she had urged him to treat it all as bygones be bygones; he was harping on his past to maintain that he had no right to live. Moved by her predicament, as Dhruva sounded sympathetic, she thanked him for his empathy, and said that she would try to persuade her man to consult a psychiatrist.

A week later, at an unmanned level crossing not far from Hyderabad, Murali's body was retrieved from his Standard Ten, crushed on the railway tracks. As the graphologist confirmed that the writing of the suicide note found in Murali's shirt pocket matched his handwriting and the post-mortem report indicated a drunken death on the tracks at ten-thirty that night, there was no reason to suspect foul play. But what if Neha's visit to the police station was but a red herring, so he thought it fit to delve into her life and times, and as he heard it through the grapevine that Murali, suspecting her fidelity, was wont to ill-treat her, Dhruva wanted to probe the matter as probable murder.

On closure scrutiny, it was obvious that the suicide note was an odd tear-out from a foolscap paper and the tone and tenor of the text suggested that it could have been a part of some story, obviously penned by the deceased. That amused him for muse or no muse, these days; all are at writing, which made it difficult for the readers to separate the originals from the imitations. What if Neha got hold of some manuscript with the suicide note and all, returned by some magazine or the other and derived the idea to script Murali's end with it, so Dhruva went round the magazine houses, in one of which, an assistant editor readily recalled the queer story with that suicide pitch, whose manuscript was returned to the sender only recently. And that naturally tilted the needle of suspicion towards Neha's involvement, which made him confront her with his finding.

Owning up her guilt, Neha lamented that Murali used to treat her merely as a sexual object, that too when he could not take some whore or the other to bed and adding insult to injury, whenever he had her, he made that clear to her. How mean men can become to demean women, she lamented, and slighted thus, she seduced Mohan, Murali's friend, for sex and self-worth. As Murali got wind of it, he calibrated his responses cunningly; as his cruelty towards her sunk to the depths of depravity so as to sponge on Mohan, he showed incredulous warmth towards him. Soon, she realized that her man was scheming to avenge himself on her paramour, by estranging his wife Nalini from him; well, Mohan owed his wealth and all to the benevolence of his in-laws. Not wanting to be the cause of Mohan's ruin, she alerted him to Murali's designs, and offered to end their liaison. But afraid of Murali's potential for mischief, Mohan thought of eliminating him through a *supari* killing, but fearing that the foolhardy of a third party could ruin it all for them, she chartered the course of that murder as by then she had in her hands that fatal manuscript.

On that fateful day, she induced Murali to drink all day and when he was dead drunk, and as planned, for an alibi, Mohan and she purchased those first-show tickets at the Odeon Theatre, which they left as soon as the movie began. Reaching home hastily, she induced the drunken Murali to let her take him to the outskirts for fresh air, and drove him to the earmarked place in their Standard Ten, followed Mohan in his Maruti, which he had earlier parked in a lane nearby her house. Steering the Standard Ten onto the desolate railway tracks, and having helped the drunken Murali to rest on the steering wheel, she herself sat next to him until the scheduled train speeded in. Glad for the good riddance of the bad rubbish and proud of that perfect murder, they drove back to the city in Mohan's Maruti.

Radha wondered how Neha's righteousness motivated her to murder her man, Dhruva opined that it only proved that life was a bundle of contradictions and crime was an ingredient part of it. Won't one species kill the other for self-preservation? What else was Murali's murder but a means of warding off Mohan's ill-being, and not wanting to derail her blissful future that her abused past had earned for her, he closed the matter as a case of suicide.

Admiring his empathy for the 'preys on the prowl' and sinking into his arms, Radha said that it would appear that without some divine hand to guide it, there could never be a perfect murder, and added that should things mundane ever make it imperfect, it was as if, the culprit could still count on him.

Deaths in *Spandan*

Kavya returned to Dhruva's 'think of the devil' welcome and Radha's 'what's the news' query before Raju greeted her with a cup of filter coffee. As Radha began exhorting Kavya to lead her to the leads that she might have laid her hands on, Dhruva would have none of that for he felt that, as it was not wise to mix drinks, so it was prudent that his assistants did not mix their leads in between them. What with her enthusiasm reined in thus, as Radha kept mum, Dhruva led Kavya into the study to have a first-hand account of her fact-findings.

Kavya told him that her enquiries at Guntur led her to an elderly woman, who, having recognized Ranjit from his photograph that she had carried, recalled that he lived next door with his newly wed wife, who kept aloof from all, save Shyamala, aunt of her childhood friend Rani. As Ranjit did not mix much either, all suspected that they could be an eloped couple trying to cover their tracks, and soon, as he disappeared deserting her, the neighborhood was agog with 'I told you so', but when she too left shortly thereafter, no one knows where, the grapevine only grew. Well, that was so long ago but Shyamala, who was due to return soon from the U.S, where she had been to help her daughter deliver, might be in the know of the aftermath of the elopement that went awry.

Recalling Radha's intriguing description of her childhood friend as 'full-soul mate and half-namesake', Dhruva thought what if Shyamala's niece happened to be Radha's childhood friend, and if it were so, won't it mean that Ranjit's deserted wife was none other than Radha herself. What a circle of love it makes if Radha's friend Rani were to be the Rani, his child bearer! Whatever, he realized that Shyamala's niece holds the key to Radha's fate but thought it was premature to share the clue with Kavya.

That evening, when Radha proposed that the apprentice should celebrate her maiden foray with three cheers over Gin with Thumbs Up, even Kavya said that she was a game for it, Dhruva said in half jest, that Radha might rue her move for Kavya might out drink her. Mixing the drink for Kavya, Radha said in jest that it always paid to keep the other woman high, especially when the stakes were high, and after a couple of drinks, a thrilled Kavya said that she would oblige Radha so as to make up for the lost drinking time, and, as if to make good her promise, when she wanted to have a third one, Dhruva said that she better stopped at that. While as a tipsy Kavya insisted, Radha broke the deadlock by mixing a small one for her, and when Raju came to announce dinner for them, Radha said bottoms up, Dhruva stubbed his cigar and Kavya sipped the last dreg.

Next morning, when Dhruva was at the cards table playing rummy with the women, Raju said that Inspector Simon, who replaced Shakeel at the Jubilee Hills police station, came to see him. Being privy to the fact that Simon was advised by all to avoid him for Shakeel could have bungled up the fake notes case at his behest, Dhruva sensed that Simon's was no friendly visit. Stepping into the anteroom tentatively and greeting the cop warmly, Dhruva enquired in jest whether he came to the Castle Hills for a morning walk; but when Simon said, rather tersely, that he was there to question Kavya about a double murder in *Spandan*, Dhruva knew it was no joking time.

As Dhruva led him into the study, Simon said that upon receiving a late night complaint that foul smell was emanating from *Spandan*, the police broke open the door and found the decomposed bodies of a young man and a woman. With no traces of bodily injuries or signs of forcible entry, prima facie, it appeared that they might have died in a suicide pact. But as it transpired that the dead were not the residents of the house, the police were at a loss to understand as to how so soon after the house owner's mysterious death, these unknown characters should have met their end there in a like fashion. While it was puzzling enough that the house was locked with the landlady away for long, the assertion of a *chowkidar* in the locality a *burka*-clad woman entered the house four days back made it all the more intriguing. Since the neighbors were no wiser to Kavya's whereabouts, Simon came to know from the Jubilee Hills post office that her letters were being redirected to 9, Castle Hills, which should explain his rather unwelcome visit.

As Dhruva broke the news to Kavya, she was shocked beyond belief, and wanted to go to *Spandan* to see it all for herself, but Simon said that she should try to identify the dead at the Gandhi Hospital before all else. Accompanied by Dhruva and Radha, Kavya made it to the mortuary and identified the dead as Pravar and Natya, and Simon had let her off after recording her statement and obtaining her assurance of cooperation in the investigation. While Kavya kept mum in confusion, a morose Radha suggested that Dhruva better had a last look at Natya, but he preferred to retain her *pallu*-covered face for a memory, and so desisted from seeing her decomposed body.

Upon reaching home, saying that she was too dazed to comprehend the situation as Kavya rushed into her room, Dhruva was left alone with Radha. As Dhruva began saying that he was at a loss to comprehend the mysterious deaths, Radha told him that there were questions for Kavya to answer after all. Given that she only had the house key, who could have led the ill-starred couple into *Spandan* but Kavya in *burka*? Who else could have abetted them to commit suicide, if it were the case? Who would have benefited from their end? Was she not craving to begin life afresh, and was it possible with Pravar and Natya around? Natya had vouchsafed that Kavya had a cunning mind with criminal impulses; maybe her going to Guntur was a means of acquiring an alibi.

As if to free himself from Radha's brainwash, Dhruva rushed to the Jubilee Hills police station to get an update from Simon, who said that prima facie Kavya remained the sole suspect and revealed that he asked his men to review the dossier on her husband's murder to bring her under the scanner. Dhruva assured him that even though Kavya was his client, if he scented her criminal hand behind the murders, he didn't intend to hold her brief. Simon said that he hoped Dhruva would not hinder his investigation, assuring him of his bona fide, Dhruva said that he better took him to *Spandan* for a second opinion in cracking the case. Simon said that on second thought he felt that Pravar and Natya could have died of poisoning, and as the remnants of packed food were found in the dustbin, it was apparent that the kitchen was in disuse for quite a while. As there were no signs of the deceased having moved around the house, it can be said that they died shortly after they got in, at which Dhruva wanted to know whether the door key was found in the house. Simon said that it was not traced in spite of a thorough search, for after snaring them in, Kavya would have left with it on the sly. As the Godrej lock was self-locking, Pravar and Natya too wouldn't have bothered, even if she had told them that she wanted to take away the key with her.

When they reached *Spandan*, as the guard opened the door for them, Simon said that, as the police had to force open the door, the Godrej lock was damaged, which he had substituted any way. Entering the dwelling and noticing the main door bolt was missing, Dhruva asked Simon whether there was any when they broke open the door, and as the cop confirmed that there was none when the door was forced open, the detective drawn his attention to the telltale marks of its having been in place until very recently. Having scanned the damaged Godrej lock with his magnifying glass, Dhruva turned his attention to the drawing room and as he was done with it, Simon led him into the guest room, where a *burka* was laid on the clothesline. Picking up the garment, Dhruva looked for a tailor's label or a dhobi mark on it, and finding none he had its measure with a tape that he had brought along. Simon said there were some more in the attached toilet of the master bedroom, and realizing that *burkas* held the key to the murders, Dhruva tallied them all with the one found in guestroom. When Dhruva turned his attention to the empty wardrobe, Simon told him as they failed to trace the keys in the house; they broke them open, but found nothing

worthwhile therein. Dhruva asked whether the absence a *burka* in the wardrobe was recorded in the police *panchanama*, Simon said though it was not done, he would make good the lapse in his case diary.

Wanting Simon to send the damaged Godrej lock for forensic examination, Dhruva entered the lawn and began scanning the ground around the guest room window with his magnifying glass. When, Simon suggested that it was not a case of forcible entry through the window, Dhruva said that he was looking for signs of an easy passage from there to the main door. Soon as the detective said that he had nothing more to look for there, the cop led him back to the police station, where they spent some time together.

Arraigned in Remand

Closeting with a nonplussed Kavya when Dhruva asked her about her house keys, she pulled out a key from her purse, and told him that after Ranjit's death, she got the old Godrej lock replaced with a new one and kept the other two keys in the bank locker along with her jewelry and a bunch of cupboards' keys, which she volunteered to show him. Giving him possession of the key, as she led him to the Andhra Bank, he asked her what for she got the door bolt removed while replacing the door lock, and apparently surprised, she said that she had no idea about it. When he asked her what made her leave her *burkas* on the clothes-line in her bathroom, swearing that she never wore a *burka* all her life, she wondered who might have planted them there to implicate her in the murder.

When they reached the bank, greeting her warmly, the manger wondered why she became so scarce of late; as she told him the purpose of her visit, he helped her complete the formalities, and she led Dhruva to the locker, from which she retrieved two door keys with a bunch of other keys, which she entrusted to him. As she looked at him in hope, he said that if the post-mortem report were to imply foul play, Simon was sure to arrest her and press for her custodial questioning. When she lamented how her past came to haunt her, hugging her lightly as if to demonstrate his trust in her, he said that she better obtained an anticipatory bail, before he could bail her out of her predicament. She said that she better subjected herself to the due process of law to come out clean as she was confident of defending herself in the court, in all admiration, he assured her that he would get to the bottom of the crime for truth to prevail. Nonetheless, updating all the murders to help her fashion her arguments to avoid remand, he dropped her at their place and headed to the forensic laboratory with those keys.

As soon as the post-mortem revealed that Pravar and Natya died of poisoning, Simon armed with an arrest warrant and accompanied by a woman police, descended on 9, Castle Hills, and led away Kavya to the Jubilee Hills police station for questioning. The next day, watched by Dhruva and Radha from the gallery of that Nampally Sessions Court, Simon produced Kavya before Purushottam Rao the magistrate, and the Public Prosecutor, Jeevan Reddy recapped Kavya's life from the time of her self-confessed association with Pravar until his death in *Spandan*, along with Natya his companion. As Kavya heard him impassively, turning eloquent, he stated that she could have murdered her husband at the behest of Pravar, her paramour, who would have brooked no rival in her bed, and, later tired of the rut she willy-nilly got into, got rid of him too, to get out of it. Besides, her hand of guilt that poisoned her husband would have developed an urge to eliminate the abettor lover, and it was

immaterial whether she had a motive or not, to murder Natya, as, if left alive, she would have exposed the indicted to get the noose. Wasn't it was a case of her neck or Natya's, and the choice would be clear even to a novice of a defense lawyer.

What can be more incriminating against the indicted, Reddy exhorted, than the fact that three deaths occurred in her house and those who died after consuming some slow-acting poison were all close to her. Besides, there was an eyewitness to testify that a *burka*-clad woman, who could be the accused, had entered the house the day the couple could have been poisoned. He asserted that as the circumstantial evidence pointed towards Kavya's involvement in the murder of not only Pravar and Natya but also Ranjit, her husband, her custodial interrogation was imperative in cracking the cases. Averring that if let loose, she would be able to tamper with whatever little evidence that would have been left to implicate her, and by way of the final nail on her bail coffin, he had insinuated that she had misused the anticipatory bail granted to her in her husband's murder case by killing her paramour and his companion; so he sought police custody of her for a fortnight at the least.

Permitted by the court to argue her own case, Kavya owned up the facts of her life as brought out by the prosecution, but pointed out that the Public Prosecutor suffered from selective amnesia as he had conveniently forgotten that the same poison also killed Shakeel, and that he too was last seen with a *burka*-clad woman. What if all the four murders were the handiwork of the woman, who allegedly poisoned Shakeel, and since she had no acquaintance, much less a motive to kill him, the police should have looked elsewhere for the killer of what appeared to be interconnected crimes. When she reminded the court that logic was a double-edged sword that cuts both ways, Reddy said that she would have killed Shakeel to advance such an argument; but the magistrate, by no means amused with that wondered why the police failed to pursue that line of investigation since the identity of the *burka*-clad woman, last seen with the cop, is seemingly relevant to the investigation of the other two cases.

As Reddy said that he had no more to add, the magistrate opined that while the accused at large might hamper the investigation, it was not a fair proposition either to interrogate her without compelling reasons, but at the same time as he had to take the public interest also into account, he ruled that Kavya might remain in the judicial custody for four weeks, before which the police should produce prima-facie evidence, if any, against her, failing which she would be entitled to seek her unconditional release thereafter.

Thanking the magistrate for his fairness, Kavya submitted that continued police presence in her precincts was inimical to her public image and Simon volunteered to withdraw the guard forthwith.

Depressing Discovery

While Simon took Kavya to the Chanchalguda Jail in his jeep, Dhruva drove Radha straight to *Spandan* in his Esteem, reaching which he collected the door keys from the guard.

Radha alerted him to a heap of *burkas* on the clothesline in the master bedroom's attached toilet, and seeing him seemingly unenthused, she proposed that she might wear one of them to have a feel of it. Saying in jest that even that tent-of-a-garment might fail to hide the alluring features of her hourglass figure, he let her take him around the bungalow before he led her out of

it. Getting into the car, she reminded him about the *burkas*, and thanked him for not having put her through the choking regimen, and as he remained silent, she became anxious and asked him what was bothering him. When he said pensively that he was only wondering how odd it could be when women wore kept mum thereafter.

Dropping her at home, Dhruva drove to the forensic laboratory, where he learned that while the main door key retained by Kavya had traces of wax on it; the other two retrieved from the bank locker were dry and clean. Beset with the mixed feelings the findings induced in him, he reached the Jubilee Hills police station to know what the original Godrej lock had to reveal. Revealing that the lock was unhampered, as Simon maintained that the very fact had tilted the needle of suspicion back towards Kavya, Dhruva told him that for the very reason he could see her un-involvement in the crime coming to the fore.

Over drinks that evening, Radha said that luckily for Kavya, the court didn't reckon her motive to murder Shakeel though it was apparent that she didn't take it kindly to the cop for having falsely implicated Pravar in the fake-notes case. Wasn't it her wont to identify Pravar's detractors as her enemies before Dhruva could clear her head ruled by the 'Stockholm Syndrome'? Besides, having shed the Pravar blinkers was she not enamored of Dhruva, and were it not possible that she might have thought of erasing her past by eliminating Pravar and Natya to usher in a new romance in her life?

Dhruva said that she had to wait for the answers until he cut the Gordian knot to free Kavya under siege, and added in jest that in the meantime she better reined in her jealousy; turning coy, she told him that her own future seemed to be under siege by his empathy for her rival. He tried to make light of her remark but as she said she was afraid that she was no match to her rival, he told her jocularly that to keep up her spirits; he would like to keep her on high. She said that she was a game for that and turning away Raju whenever he came to fetch them for dinner Dhruva goaded her to get drunk. After dinner, seeing her in slumber, he wondered if he was excessively lenient towards Kavya and thought, in the same vein, whether he was unnecessarily suspicious of Radha. Torn between the woman he made his own and the woman he eyed, he resolved to see Radha's place for whatever it had in store for Kavya's fate. So as Raju kept a watch on her in 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva sneaked out of her bed and set out on his nocturnal mission with a bunch of assorted keys.

Opening the cupboards in Radha's Red Hills house and rummaging through their contents, he found a photograph of hers, in her teens, with another teen that seemed to be Rani her half-namesake, staring at which, he turned nostalgic. When he broke open the locker of her steel almirah, he was depressed at finding a bottle of some potion along with two crudely made keys matching with that of *Spandan's* Godrej lock. Not wanting to believe what he had seen, he looked for *burkas*, just in case, and finding none, keeping the main door ajar, he left the place with the duplicate keys and a sample of the potion. Reaching home in a dilemma as to how to handle Radha the murderess, he relieved Raju from his vigil on Radha.

Sneaking into her bed and watching a serene Radha in her sleep, Dhruva tried to read her mind; maybe, she had reason to see Pravar's end, but didn't she seem to be fond of Natya? Surely, she bore a grudge against Shakeel, but was it Ranjit who had jilted her? If so, won't these bits and pieces jell well to form an inimical whole? Was it really the case? Boggled down by myriad thoughts about Radha's motives, Dhruva had a disturbed sleep.

Next morning, as Radha went to serve him bed coffee, seeing her demeanor, Dhruva found it hard to picture her as a murderess, but during their breakfast, he saw a change of color in her as she received a call on her mobile. Saying that a friend

of hers had a tiff with her man, as she had to rush out to help, it was clear to him that it was the anticipated call about the burglary in her house; after all, he did leave the main door ajar for some neighbor to smell the rat. After Radha left him, with the ever-expanding ‘volume of evidence’ against her, he rushed to the forensic laboratory with the keys and the sample fluid he collected from her house.

Seeing Radha regain her composure when he returned, Dhruva asked her what came out of her counseling, and she dismissed that as a false alarm as her friend’s husband was a regular wife-beater, he only thrashed her a little more than usual. While she wondered why her friend was averse to divorcing him, he said women in an abusive relationship tend to perceive themselves as martyrs, and it could be hard to pull them out of their inimical groove, in which they came live in a psychic state of bliss.

That evening when Dhruva went back to the forensic laboratory, he came to know that the potion was a slow acting poison like the one that caused the deaths under investigation and the keys found in her place were crude imitations of *Spandan’s* Godrej door key. What with the incriminating evidence in hand, Dhruva felt like confronting Radha with it, but, on second thoughts, he realized that she was bound to dismiss them as his plants to implicate her for saving Kavya. Besides, there was no way to link her to the murders without a compelling motive to kill each one of them; after all the public prosecutor had failed to persuade the court for Kavya’s custody notwithstanding mounds of circumstantial evidence backed by irrefutable motives to kill Ranjit and Pravar, if not Shakeel and Natya. What was worse, the court might infer that Kavya, even in judicial custody, was trying to influence justice by aiding and abetting him, and that won’t do any good for her cause; its better to bide his time till he gathered the missing link to complete the chain of evidence against Radha.

The Red Herring

With Kavya in judicial custody, Simon had redoubled his efforts to nail her down, but seeing no scope for a breakthrough, he thought it was an idea to ascertain the goings on in her camp. When Simon made it to 9, Castle Hills that evening, inviting him to have drinks with Radha and him, Dhruva began to mix a Bagpiper large with soda. Though Simon said that he wanted a private audience with Dhruva, handing him his drink, and holding out his glass to clink, Dhruva said that Radha being his confident and companion, he should have no hesitation in opening up in her presence.

Simon said that, as Dhruva would be aware, the press that dubbed the cases as ‘poison murders’, began ridiculing the police for their failure to nab the culprits, and lamented how all the clues to Kavya’ culpability came to naught. Dhruva told him that if a criminal investigation were to be driven by an urge to fix someone we want to see as the guilty one that would only end up being in a no man’s land. Simon said that, maybe, it was wrong to club all the murders together, Dhruva said that thanks to the media, all knew that a woman in *burka* could have poisoned Ranjit; what if someone thought of eliminating Shakeel in a like fashion to make it seem as a sequel to it, and if anything, the cumulative publicity of both these murders would have encouraged yet another to adopt the same tactic to do away Pravar, if not Natya, who might have been an unintended victim, being his constant companion.

Simon agreed that though it was the right approach to de-link the deaths, yet he had a hunch that Kavya, with her exposure to law and her acquaintance with a criminal was readymade to be a murderess and added that with a little bit of luck, he might stumble upon the evidence to nail her, and have the last laugh as well. Wondering whether Simon was aiming his gun at him, Dhruva told him that he should not mistake his own empathy for the accused as his proclivity to shield her; he would surely alert the cop if ever he found incriminating evidence against any.

With only four days remaining of Kavya's judicial custody, as Simon wanted to get her remand extended by another fortnight, the public prosecutor told him that unless he came up with some tangible reasons for her continued detention, the court was bound to grant her unconditional bail. As Simon was reconciled to Kavya's release, the receptionist informed him that a woman rang up to inform that some vital clues pertaining to the 'poison murders' could be found at 9, Castle Hills, and that placed him in a dilemma. Would it be fair to raid the place as Dhruva gave his word to alert him, if ever he finds any evidence against any? Maybe, he could be oblivious of the inimical clues as he would not have pried upon Kavya, his client and a guest as well, but, as is evident, Radha could have stumbled upon something. Was it not obvious that she was the informer?

Simon thought that it was his police dharma to act on the specific lead, and so as he descended upon 9, Castle Hills, with a search warrant, Dhruva said that he didn't think there were any skeletons in his cupboards. When Simon said apologetically that to begin with, he would like to confine the search to Kavya's quarters, Dhruva said that if warranted, he was welcome to scan the entire premises. What with a bottle of some potion readily found beneath Kavya's cupboard, as an elated Simon signaled the end, Dhruva insisted that he would like to retain a sample of the same for its validation; when formalities of signing the papers and sealing the samples were over, Simon left with one of those to the forensic labs.

Watching the developments from the sidelines till then and wondering why he was not perturbed as expected, as Radha said where all that would lead Kavya to, Dhruva said that he hoped that the arm of her fate would overpower the hidden hand of adversity, and unable to comprehend his state of mind, she withdrew into her room. But finding him morose even at the luncheon time, she said in jest what if she substituted Kavya in jail to see if she can enliven him at home, and in repartee, he said what if the jailor, lost to her allure, lost the key of her cell as well. Bewildered by the turn of his phrase, she espied his demeanor to probe his mind, but confronted by a poker face, she thought better of it and so retired to her room.

After his siesta, while Dhruva was waiting for Simon's call, Raju delivered him the mail that contained one from Rani, which made him expectant for it seemed to contain some photograph, which he thought could be that of their lovechild. But as it turned out to be an old snap of Radha with Ranjit, even as he initially felt relieved for Kavya's sake, he remained sad for long on Radha's account. Recovering, he gathered from the letter that though Rani was away in Delhi, she felt their son made her feel ever near to him. When Shyamala, her auntie, wrote to her that Kavya had been enquiring about her husband Ranjit's past, she could guess who that was, for the *Operation Checkmate* was ever fresh in her memory and that the information was to be sent to 9, Castle Hills, had only confirmed her conjecture. Radha in the picture, who was close to her at school, fell in love with Ranjit, their neighbor in Waltair, with whom she had eloped to Guntur. Radha had given her their supposedly wedding photograph, just in case, but soon, as she herself shifted to Hyderabad; they lost contact with each other. Had she heeded to Dhruva's suggestion to meet Ranjit that day in 9, Castle Hills, maybe she would have identified him as the one who ditched her

friend. She began wondering whether Radha the suspected murderess that Dhruva mistook herself for, was indeed Radha, her friend, in the photograph. If her information was of any use to him, Rani wrote in conclusion, she would feel that she had contributed to his cause, which might recompense him for her false entry into his life as a pseudo assistant.

Wondering how the one-time friends, unknown to each other, as if to make the world seem small, had converged on him to serve their own ends, for long he reminisced the time he spent with both of them. When it dawned on him that Rani, his live-in partner when he rescued Kavya, should have provided the material to pin down Radha, her old friend, he saw the irony of life and the hand of destiny in the affairs of man.

When Dhruva reached the Jubilee Hills police station, a sheepish looking Simon greeted him as the ‘poison’ that he seized from Kavya’s room turned out to be an inane solution. Shamed by the fiasco, as Simon apologized, Dhruva, who, trusted him by then, briefed him all about his housebreak into Radha’s Red Hills house, and theorized the aftermath thus: he was quick to realize that Radha would shift the deadly thing into 9, Castle Hills, for its safekeeping though that could also spell Kavya’s doom. So, unknown to Radha, he replaced the bottle with a similar one with that harmless look-alike potion, and with Kavya’s release on hand, she planted the ‘fake thing’ beneath Kavya’s cupboard and induced the police to search for it. When Dhruva reminded Simon about the parody on the adulterated liquor - the Scotch you drink is not the Scotch you think you drink – and said that the bottle that Radha planted beneath Kavya’s cupboard did not contain the poison that she thought it contained; the cop’s face wore the look of a devout.

Wiser for his reverses, as Simon wanted the proof of Radha having possessed the ‘real thing’ before he acted against her, Dhruva gave him the original bottle with poison that was bound to contain her fingerprints. While Simon still remained skeptical, for him to picture her motive to murder Ranjit, who jilted her, Dhruva showed him the wedding photograph of Radha with Ranjit, and on their way to the forensic laboratory, the detective appraised the cop about the story of Radha’s life abused by Ranjit, scandalized by Pravar and brutalized by Shakeel.

Wages of Abuse

Next day, as Simon reached 9, Castle Hills, with a woman constable in tow, to apprehend Radha, as if on a cue, Dhruva kept away from the scene.

When Radha, who remained haughty, wanted to know what were the charges brought against her, Simon informed her that she was being arraigned on the charge of murdering Ranjit, Shakeel, Pravar and Natya, in that order. Overwhelmed though by the unexpected turn of the events, as she remained cool and wanted to know what evidence Simon had against her, he said that her fingerprints were found on the bottle containing the poison that was traced in the victims’ viscera. Rattling her further, as Simon showed her the damning photograph of hers with Ranjit, seeing that her game was up, she asked him whether Dhruva was privy to all that. When Simon revealed that it was the detective who had gathered all the evidences against her, a shattered Radha offered to surrender.

When the cop produced her before the court, as Radha said that she was willing to confess to her crime, the magistrate led her into his chambers to record her statement.

I, Radha, w/o late Madhu, r/o 13, Red Hills, Hyderabad, she began to dictate calmly, confess to having willfully poisoned not only Ranjit but also Shakeel, Pravar and Natya. I am aware that this averment, being made on my own volition, could be used against me in my trial, and I have no reservations on that count for it is not my intention to evade sentence. It is not the aim of this painful confession to earn sympathy or reprieve for myself as I am looking forward to the gallows to end my burden of living. After my ventures into those adventures, surely an act of murder is no mean an adventure, now I seek death that deals with the unknown as it is the biggest adventure of life. When Ranjit ditched me though I was pregnant with his child, I blamed only myself as I yielded to him blindly and then eloped with him naively. But his later day refusal to help the hapless Raghu, the son I bore for him, that too after using me all again, induced in me an enduring hatred for him. I came to see him as the cause of my fall and began to abhor him with all my heart, and as Madhu, the man I married, started humiliating Raghu by calling him a bastard, my bitterness to the deserter only increased. When my boy, unable to bear the slights, committed suicide on the railway track, how I wished that Ranjit met the same fate, but how I were to know that a worse fate awaited me.

Pravar, who had poisoned his sister Mala and Madhu who kept her, had succeeded in misleading Shakeel into believing that it was my handiwork, and that set me on a ruinous course. Oh, failing to make me sign on the dotted line for his credit of cracking the case, the cop developed an urge to get even with me, and on the pretext of collecting clues, how he routinely took me out and raped me at gunpoint. Worse still, he began sharing me with a magistrate to let him illegally detain me, and how I endured the ordeal before I was let out on bail that was after both of them had had their fill, I only knew.

When I saw that live coverage of the telecast, in which Shakeel claimed Pravar as the kingpin of the counterfeit racket, though I felt the latter got his just desserts, I was seized with an urge to avenge against the former. As if guided by the hand of combined destiny - of the prey and its hounds - I chanced to see Detective Dhruva's ad for a lady assistant. Sensing that a stint as his assistant might lead me to the avenues of avenge though rendering me vulnerable to the detective's charms, a welcome prospect for a single woman anyway, I ventured into his amorous arena to get even with my tormentors.

When I saw Dhruva, it was love at first sight for me, and as he too was enamored of me, I wanted to forget about the past and build my future with him. But how I were to know that afflicted by Stockholm Syndrome, Kavya would be pushing Ranjit and Pravar back onto my anvil of avenge, and if anything, as my proximity to Dhruva brought Shakeel too onto my radar, I found myself drawing the triangle of revenge. As if their fate had beckoned me, I laid my hands on that potion of slow acting poison; in a way my fate had combined with theirs to play foul with my life that I was recasting it in the mould of love! Sadly, my need for a guinea pig to test its potency and to calibrate the right dosage to seal their fate made Dicey the first collateral victim of my vengeance.

When I heard about Kavya's affair with Pravar, I gloated over her fall, for it would hurt Ranjit no end, before I would see his end, and seized with an urge to see the turmoil of a cuckold, I contrived to meet him. When he begged me to forget the past and grant it to him again, I led him up the garden path; what a vicarious pleasure I had as I tortured him before I ended it all for him with that fatal dose! By then as my love for Dhruva began to rule my heart and mind quenching my thirst for revenge, I forgave Shakeel and forgot about Pravar. But at Dhruva's behest, as Shakeel began probing Ranjit's past, I saw the need to catch him before he caught me, if only not to lose my love and he fell into my trap when I invited him to share some clues to tie Kavya's hands with Ranjit's murder. When we met in my Red Hills house, I induced him to have some drinks with me, and he agreed, hoping that the rendezvous might end up in my bed, only to end up dead in his own bed. What with my old wounds having opened up, I wanted to train my guns on the 'malicious magistrate' as well, and to my peculiar disappointment, I came to know that the blackguard was dead and gone.

While Ranjit's death removed the bitterness of my past, Shakeel's end threatened my future for Dhruva started believing in Kavya's innocence and began leaning towards her. Beset by jealousy, as I was bugged to keep her away from him, it occurred to me that if Pravar were to be poisoned in her house, it would be hard for Dhruva not to suspect her hand in it. So, I accessed her door key from her handbag, got the duplicates made and raked my brains for a plan that would have spared Natya and yet snared Pravar into *Spandan*. How badly I wanted to tend her as my daughter being Dhruva's wife, but failing to conceive any escape route to her, sadly I had to sacrifice her as I did Dicey before. So, when Kavya left for Guntur to probe into Ranjit's past, I made Natya believe that while she herself was away for an alibi, Kavya had arranged their *supari* killing. I convinced Natya that the safest place for them to hide was *Spandan*, and, so, she led Pravar, and sadly, herself as well, into my trap. When Natya came to collect the key of their deathtrap, I made her wear a *burka* and gave her the poisoned food for dinner, and promised to fetch them breakfast the next morning.

Dhruva, in spite of it all, stuck with Kavya, and that perplexed as well as perturbed me for I was torn between the sisterly feeling I developed for her and the womanly jealousy that his interest in her induced in me. When it became clear to me that it was a question of her neck or my neck, I sought to implicate her with the 'poison bottle', and to my dismay, Dhruva saved the day for her by replacing the poison with some harmless potion. Maybe, what spoiled the show for me was Ranjit's photograph with me, and it's as if he had avenged himself for his death at my hands, never mind, while alive, he murdered me emotionally. Was it a poetic justice in a prosaic way, I would never know!

Radha finished in tears as those present could barely hold theirs, and as she signed her confessional statement, the magistrate ordered her judicial custody, and Kavya's unconditional release.

Decoding the Crime

When Simon led Kavya back to 9, Castle Hills, finding Dhruva in the portico, she rushed to him as though to dispel his pensiveness, and the cop, handing him a copy of Radha's confessional statement, went into the anteroom to allow them a free reign on their emotions.

Discerning myriad emotions in his demeanor as he read it, as if to share his feelings, Kavya nestled her head on his shoulder. Sensing that he was overcome with grief as he had finished with it, she exhorted him to be strong, so that he could be of strength to the hapless woman. Thanking her for reminding him of his duty, as he wished that she pleaded Radha's case in the court as well, she said that though she would have loved to be her lawyer, yet she felt that besides making herself tense for it involved her rival's life and death, it could cause unease in the arraigned for the same reason. Patting her in apparent appreciation, he rang up Prativadi, the feted defense lawyer, after which he fetched Simon to join them.

As Simon wanted to know how he came to suspect Radha, Kavya said that the recap might as well help him unwind himself. Dhruva said that his narrative might embarrass her as well but she assured him that there was no way she would be sore on that score as she came to treat her past as a bad dream. Dhruva began the recap saying that he felt guilty when he heard that Kavya developed a soft spot for Pravar, believing that Ranjit was hand in glove with Shakeel in foisting the fake-notes case on him. When Ranjit said that he suspected she became close to the criminal, he realized that she was a victim of the 'Stockholm Syndrome' induced psyche, and he suffered from remorse, as the misfired idea was his.

Pausing to have a look at her and seeing her surprised look, his demeanor became dull, but as she laid her hand on him with love-filled eyes, holding her hand, he resumed the recap. His focus had always been to wean Kavya away from Pravar before his inimical influence proved to be her undoing. But what made it worse for him was he had no way to prevent her anticipated fall in that brat's company, and the murder of her husband, in which, possibly, she might have had a hand, only added to his misery.

When she came to seek his help to nab her husband's killer, he was not sure whether she came with a red herring or not, but when he saw her sense of purpose, he was inclined to believe her, (he looked at Kavya as she fondly caressed his hand) in spite of Radha's averments about her likely guilt. While Kavya's remorseful confession, in the wake of Shakeel's death, reinforced his belief in her innocence, Radha's pointers to Kavya's guilt tended to dent her credibility though he was unable to see how Shakeel could have eaten from either Natya's or Kavya's hand, not to speak Pravar's. Why, it would have been far more easy for Pravar to bring in his, or Rajan's, revolver into play, and that seemingly ruled out his involvement in Shakeel's murder and Kavya's too by extension.

Radha's innuendoes that he could have been blinded by Kavya's allure didn't help either and being pulled apart emotionally by two superb women he came to admire; it was as if he was truly sundered on the investigative ground. But it was the murder of Pravar and Natya at Kavya's place that reinvigorated his investigative mind, why, in every way it was an extraordinary murder, though Radha tended to picture it as a cut and dry case of Kavya's culpability; there was no denying that Kavya had the motive as well as the means to commit the crime, never mind her alibi, as Guntur was but a six-hour drive from *Spandan*.

When Simon told him that the deceased ate packed food, the plot only was thickened – thought it wouldn't have been hard for Kavya to lure the duo into her house, but would it have been easy for her to make them eat the poisoned stuff without herself sharing it with them? Was Kavya as naive as not to know that lying in her house, the duo's dead bodies would surely point their fingers at her role in their death? Why shouldn't she have poisoned them in their own den even if she wanted to murder them out of foolhardy? Was such a course not far easier for her? But what if Pravar, spurned by her, developed a suicidal urge to hurt her? True, one's psychic impulse for suicide stems from the obsessive desire to inflict emotional injury upon the one that caused hurt to one's self, but how he got the door key. What if Kavya in their bonhomie give him one of the keys, but then, why none was found in *Spandan* after their death. With the lock being unhampered, it was evident that the ill-fated couple were snared into *Spandan* but why should have Kavya had them there to implicate herself? When he realized that Kavya had only one door key with her, and the other two were in the bank locker, which she did not access ever since she came to stay at 9, Castle Hills, it was apparent that her hands were clean.

What about the *burka*-clad woman, a common factor in all the murders? I was certain that it was a woman and not a man in the *burka*. Didn't Godse give up the idea of donning a *burka* to assassinate Gandhi realizing that man can't hide his gait behind that? Why *burkas* in *Spandan* were lying in the wrong place, Natya could have hung hers on the clothes-line of the guest room's bathroom and not on that of the master bedroom's toilet? Given that the talk about some *burka*-clad woman behind the poison murders was thick in the air, it made no sense for Kavya not to get rid of them, so they were clearly planted to mislead the cops, what's more, it confirmed that the intruders had access only to the main door key and not that of the cupboards, the right place for their stacking.

When he noticed that the door bolt was missing, it was apparent that it was removed beforehand by the culprit to ensure that the duo don't get bolted inside, for as corpses they could not have let him or her in to retrieve the key, before the neighbors smelt foul. So, the 'entry key' to the murders was not the 'genuine one', literally as well as figuratively, and that the house key that Kavya brought with her to Castle Hills showed traces of wax on it, it was clear that someone got the duplicate keys made out of it – one to enable the duo to enter into *Spandan* and another for her own entry into it to retrieve the one she gave them. Who could have done that? Not the Rajus for sure.

Who would have wanted to eliminate Pravar as it was evident that Natya was a collateral damage to implicate Kavya? Why not Radha? Besides, as she had reason to see the end of Shakeel, if not in Ranjit's, he set out to her Red Hills house for hard clues and found those keys and the potion. Since he chose to play his cards close to his chest, failing to read his hand, Radha believed that it was only a case of burglary in her house, and didn't lose much sleep over the missing keys. But as expected by him, afraid of a repeat, she smuggled the poison into 9, Castle Hills, while he, fearing that a peeved Radha could poison Kavya, had substituted it with a harmless solution (he could feel Kavya's caress on his back). When Rani, her 'half-namesake' and 'full-soul mate' as Radha put it, who too happened to come into his life, sent that incriminating photograph and as the forensic reports too nailed her to the core, he had alerted Simon about it

When Kavya wondered what would have been the case if, instead of the indicative *burkas*, Radha had indeed planted the implicating poison in *Spandan*; Dhruva said that, in that case, instead of Radha, she herself would have been in the dock fending

to avoid the noose. As Kavya felt that it was ironical that such a thin thread should have separated truth and falsehood; he averred that it was in the character of crime to uphold justice by overawing the criminal to leave a way for it to cry foul. While Kavya heaved a sigh of relief, he added that given that Radha had planned and executed the murders as she did, it was a remarkable, if diabolical, job and if it were only to be Ranjit's or Shakeel's murder, who knew, she would have had the last laugh. Recalling Dicey's death, he said that as Radha didn't leave the pet for a moment till it died, he thought then that how she cared for it, but as he could see in the hindsight, she was only monitoring how the poison worked on it; the thought of it makes him feel bitter about her but then like her killer, the pet too was a victim of victim-hood

A Poignant End

Wanting to strategize Radha's defense in the impending trial as Dhruva reached the Chanchalguda Jail with Kavya and Prativadi in tow, she sent word to him that even as she was ashamed to see him, she was averse to recounting her crimes to any lawyer, but if Kavya were willing, she would love to see her. As Kavya was led away to meet Radha, Dhruva pleaded with Prativadi to bear with Radha's reluctance until they got her around into proper groove.

While Kavya set out with empathy, Radha awaited in repentance, and when they made an eye contact, they couldn't take their eyes off each other; but finding themselves together, Radha was unable to lift her downcast eyes. When Kavya lifted Radha's head, as if for an emotional encounter, the latter presented a tearful face to her, and as the former's eyes too welled up with tears, Radha wiped them with a feeling of oneness. When Kavya took her into her arms to convey her empathy, she could feel in Radha's quivering frame, her resurgent hope for life, and when Kavya said Prativadi was sure to save her skin, Radha said she would like to entrust herself to Kavya's care. But as Kavya made her privy to her own sensitivities, Radha said she would have Prativadi if only Kavya was on hand to support her. By the end of that evocative meeting, they had discovered the latent fondness they had for each other, and when it was time for them to part for the day, Radha gave Kavya the missive, which she had penned for Dhruva.

As Prativadi was led upto Radha to take her brief, Dhruva began reading Radha's letter.

Darling:

I am ashamed that I let you down. Oh, how I betrayed your trust and belittled my love! Seized by revenge, I was not my own woman then, but now burdened with guilt, how can I show my face to you? I know how hard it could be for you, and so I do not want to bother you anymore, but if you could forgive me that would help me to await the noose with fortitude.

What with the fake-note case bringing Pravar and Shakeel into the spotlight, I came to you to test the waters of avenge. But even as I was shifting my goalpost of life in the arena of our ardor, my fate played foul with my love as Ranjit too came into the setting. It was as if fate had chosen to place in my hand, an axe to grind on the anvil of

revenge, forged by the poison of abuse. How sad that I had allowed my bitterness towards him to eclipse my life that I was recasting in the mould of your love.

Shamefully I pried upon Mithya's cupboards, in which I chanced upon her personal jottings and her long lost daughter's photograph. Later, when I showed it to Natya, she identified it as hers and I felt like I was her own mother. Thereafter, I was more determined than ever to see Pravar's end, if only to end her misery. Mine, as well as the fate of those who abused me, seemed to have been sealed when I discovered the poison that Mithya acquired, you know for what. Why my urge for revenge got the better of my love for you I would never know.

Believe me; I wanted to come out clean with you after I was done with them, in the hope that you would own me as you had owned Mithya, in spite of everything. Probably you would have, for you have a peculiar weakness for feminine criminality, if not the murders had pushed Kavya into your fold. But after that *ménage à trois* with Pravar and Natya, how odd it would have been for Kavya as your woman to have Natya as her daughter. Maybe, to save Kavya's life from that oddity, fate had ended Natya's tragic life. Why is my life any less ironical than Kavya's - as Ranjit jilted me for her, I lost my Dhruva to her. Is there a parallel by way of fact or fiction?

Perhaps, you and she deserve each other better, and I want to see you tie the knot (for that won't you earn a day's parole for me) as I pray for your married bliss. I seek your forgiveness, not as barter, but to end my agonizing life in peace.

Yours not to be,

Radha.

While he broke down reading the letter, seeing Kavya's concern for him, Dhruva gave it to her to let her comprehend his position herself.

When she too finished reading it with tear-filled eyes, he said that had he acted upon the empathy he felt for Natya that day, perhaps, he could have saved her life, and as Kavya leaned on his shoulder for his emotional support, he took her into his arms for his own solace. As she recalled her association with the unfortunate Natya, he made her privy to Mithya's inimitable life.

Mithya was the youngest of three siblings in an orthodox family and by the time she matured, her sister got married, and her brother entered college. When she was sixteen, her mother went to the U.S to assist her sister at her delivery, and their father's job kept him out of town for most of the time. That left her brother and her together most of the time, which happenstance, in the formative years of their sexuality, ushered in an unusual togetherness that insensibly led them into an incestuous relationship.

The horror of her mother, on her return, at seeing her four month-old pregnant daughter only amplified as her errant son had hanged himself, leaving Mithya to bear their shame, for abortion by then became out of redeem, forcing her parents to let her deliver her sin in secrecy. As her father gave away the girl child to an orphanage, given the abnormality of its being, she too could discern the dichotomy in its separation; even as the deprivation of her child afflicted her maternal condition, at the same time, it eased her from the grip of guilt complex, and as a way of psychic escape for all of them; her father sent her out to let her pursue her higher studies.

While the nuptials with Ashok erased the shame of incest in her subconscious, as she was morally constrained in rearing a child having orphaned one, the prospect of conception instilled in her a sense of guilt. But while she was coming to terms with her life, her man lost his moorings in moneymaking, and though she tried to stop him from entering into the rat race of life with a no-win goal, he was bent on becoming somebody in the society never mind the sacrifices they might have to make. So he left for Dubai for raising the capital for a grandiose venture, leaving her to fend for herself, and to engage herself, she took up a job but as his letters failed to fill her emotional void, for they failed to pen his longing for her, she saw the futility of holding herself anymore. Pondering over how to go about her peccadilloes, she opted for one-night stands for they wouldn't be intrusive, but as her escapades though catered to her sexual needs, yet failed to address her emotional owes. Added to that, but for his yearly sojourns, as her man showed no inclination to return into her arms, she felt as if she were reduced as his distant mistress. As if to address the emotional neglect and to shore up her self-worth thereby, she started an affair with a colleague she fancied, which ended abruptly when his distressed wife committed suicide, and she fared no better with her next paramour, as he deserted her, when his spouse threatened to divorce him.

Wearied of wooing married men, she sank into a bachelor's arms at the next turn, and as his virgin ardor matched her craving for love, she felt that she was in the seventh heaven. But as his innate need to have a family of his own broke their affair in time, she was back to square one, and vexed with the vagaries of liaisons with peers, she thought of a live-in with a lowly *a la Bona Sera*, *Mrs. Campbell* the movie she happened to see. Like Bona Sera did before her, she too set up a grocery shop, and took the young Dilip to assist her at work and cater to her in the bed.

When she all but forgot about Ashok, he returned with loads of money and an ambition to make a mountain of wealth out of it, but it didn't take her long to realize that he was into smuggling and that he returned only to head his gang's operations in the country. While she was ill at ease with his escapades, Ashok was restive at Dilip's presence in his house. Dilip too resented Ashok's return as that reduced him as a mere servant of the house though Mithya allowed him to reign in her bed. But matters came to a head after they shifted into the newly acquired bungalow at 9, Castle Hills, when Ashok wanted her to fire Dilip and she insisted that he be allowed to stay put in their A.C. Guards house.

While Ashok decided to bide for time, Dilip, seeing the writing on the wall, played up her man's neglect of her, and made her believe that there was an other woman in his life, out to take her position. Soon, he contrived to convince her that Ashok entertained the idea of arranging a *supari* to eliminate her and played upon her weakness for him by hammering that if she were killed, he would be left high and dry. Goaded by Dilip to act before it was too late, she pondered over the ways and means to eliminate her man and get away with it as well. By way of distraction, so it seemed to her, she came to know of her father's death, well after the obsequies were over. Though her family had disowned her for her amoral liaisons, she had informed her parents about her change of address to 9, Castle Hills, just in case.

In that poignant meeting between the mother and her daughter, after a decade long separation, being at a loss for words, they lost eyes to each other. When the mother opened her arms in reconciliation, the daughter closed hers for a hug of self-solace. Amidst their myriad emotions in their prolonged embrace, as the ethos of motherhood came to the fore, the mother savored her daughter while the daughter thought of her own daughter. As the spasms of her daughter's heart conveyed her resurgent craving

for her child, the mother, in that moment of self-fulfillment, felt that her daughter too should experience the same. Even as the daughter's craving to hug her own daughter had increased, the mother turned skeptical about the chances of finding the girl sixteen years after she had abandoned her there. Whatever, as the mother wanted to take her to the orphanage, the daughter felt it would be wiser for her mother to first trace her girl, and then prepare her before she herself took her under her wings.

Mithya hoped that once her mother rediscovered her daughter, she would redeem herself by adopting her own daughter, but shortly after her return to the Castle Hills, when her mother informed her that her girl had left the place without a trace, only the previous month, she was truly devastated. While that development had put the clock back on her life, the fascinating picture of her teenage daughter that her mother sent seemed to take it forward. Though her daughter was not to be traced, but after Dhruva came into her life, stirred by the resurgent maternal impulses, Mithya wanted to have children, but, sadly, her conceptions ended in miscarriages.

When Dhruva finished that recap of Mithya's disturbingly fascinating life, Kavya said that while every life was unique in its own way, as Mithya's reveals, some were more unique than the rest. He said that the way Mithya came into his life would only illustrate the truism of that, and, anyway, that was for some other day, and if not for her untimely death, instead of Radha, she herself would have discovered Natya, and that would have been a different story. If only Mithya had made him privy to the poison in the bosom of their home, maybe, Natya would have still been alive, for Radha would not have come into its possession. That Mithya kept him in the dark about the deadly thing would only prove that even in the closest of relationships, there was a limit to the openness, and as Radha's ruse to trap Kavya showed, there was no limit to the mischief, the sense of insecurity could cause.

Dhruva recounted his tryst with Rani, and said that if only he had allowed her to accompany him to the Tank Bund that evening; she would have recognized Ranjit and spilled the beans on Radha as well. Then that would have enabled him to nip Radha's urge for revenge in the bud, which would have saved her soul besides the lives of all those, and how fate had played hide and seek with Ranjit's life again as he visited 9, Castle Hills, when Rani was there! Had he insisted that she met him, what a difference it would have made to him and the rest of them! But it was not to be.

While Kavya lamented that Radha's paranoia of losing him to her should have undone Natya, he said that her apprehensions were not unfounded after all; as she glowingly took him into her arms, solaced in her embrace, he confessed to her that he loved her like none else. As she said that she would ever think aloud with him, he said, in jest, that his ears were wide open, and she crooned into them that she loved her rival too. When she said as and when Radha came out of the cage, he should make her nest at 9, Castle Hills, for their threesome life, he locked her lips that he released as Prativadi approached them with Radha's *vakalat*.

