

Prey on The Prowl



Prey on the Prowl – A Crime Novel

BS Murthy

ISBN 81-901911-4-4

Improved Edition © 2021 BS Murthy

Original copyright © 2014 BS Murthy

Cover design of Gopi's water color painting by Lattice Advertisers, Hyderabad.



F-9, Nandini Mansion,
1-10-234, Ashok Nagar,
Hyderabad – 500 020

Other books by BS Murthy –

Benign Flame – Saga of Love

Jewel-less Crown - Saga of Life

Crossing the Mirage – Passing through youth

Glaring Shadow - A stream of consciousness novel

Of No Avail: Web of Wedlock (A Novella)

Stories Varied - A Book of Short Stories

Onto the Stage – Slighted Souls and other stage and radio plays

Puppets of Faith: Theory of Communal Strife

Bhagvad-Gita: Treatise of self – help (A translation in verse)

Sundara Kānda - Hanuman's Odyssey (A translation in verse)

Agenda for Revenge

[Chapter 1](#): Prey on the Prowl

[Chapter 2](#): Shakeel's Fixation

[Chapter 3](#) : Ranjit's Predicament

[Chapter 4](#) : Rags to Riches

[Chapter 5](#) : Dhruva's Dilemma

[Chapter 6](#): The Gatecrasher

[Chapter 7](#): Operation Checkmate

[Chapter 8](#): Foul on Pravar

[Chapter 9](#): Stockholm Syndrome

[Chapter 10](#): An Aborted Affair

[Chapter 11](#): Psyche of Revenge

[Chapter 12](#): Victim of Trust

[Chapter 13](#): Backyard of Life

[Chapter 14](#): Cuckoo's Nest

[Chapter 15](#): 'Untried' Crime

[Chapter 16](#): Kavya's Quagmire

[Chapter 17](#): Murders to Mislead

[Chapter 18](#): The Other Woman

[Chapter 19](#): Shakeel's Demise

[Chapter 20](#): A Perfect Murder

[Chapter 21](#): Deaths in *Spandan*

[Chapter 22](#): Arraigned in Remand

[Chapter 23](#): Depressing Discovery

[Chapter 24](#): The Red Herring

[Chapter 25](#): Wages of Abuse

[Chapter 26](#): Decoding the Crime

[Chapter 27](#): A Poignant End

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

[Chapter 1](#)

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, Detective 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.

In that setting, as Dhruva, impelled by all that, stood engrossed, Raju, the housekeeper, fetched him a plateful of hot *pakodas*, which, facing the spatter, he began to savor, and before he had finished with the snack, Raju returned with a mug of steaming Darjeeling tea for him. Soon, as 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, the detective picked up the sachet of *lanka pogaku* to roll a cigar, and then 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 exotic cigar, as if dispelled by its strong scent, the dissipated clouds began disappearing from the horizon.

Having savored the cigar to the last puff, as he stubbed the butt and stepped out onto the lush green wet lawn, Dicey, the Alsatian, followed him, as if to leave its own footprints on the damp canvas in its master's tracks. Then, even as the rainy clouds began regrouping in the skies, he covered the garden to caress every croton and coleus as he would his pet. But when it portended downpour, Raju led Dicey into the portico and the detective headed towards the study to pick up the half-read *Crimes Digest* of the month.

But yet again, as it was a downpour, Dhruva reached the first-floor window, standing by which, he thought that it was akin to the urge of an assassin to revisit the scene of the crime, for a review of the same. Amused by his analogy, he thought the sky was at obliterating its earlier footprints on the earth, but when it ceased raining and it turned murky, as if mourning the loss of its resplendence, he too began immersing himself in the dark world of crime the *Digest* pictured, even as Raju let the pet do the patrolling of the premises.

Soon though, Dicey began barking at the gate, again inducing Dhruva to reach to the window, through which he saw a sensuous woman, tentative at the half-open Iron Gate of his mansion. Enamored 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, the detective

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. Thus, obsessed with her, though, inexplicably, he rushed to the gate, only to see her turning the bend, even as Inspector Shakeel came into view on his Bajaj Pulsar.

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

Chapter 2 **Shakeel's Fixation**

That day, when Shakeel entered the Saifabad Police Station, he was greeted by the echoes of the boots-in-attention but as he stepped into his cabin, as if calling stand-at-ease, the telephone had started ringing. However, after attending the Circle Inspector's call, as he opened the *dak* folder, the Head Constable Karim, carrying the news of a double murder, rushed up to him.

"Where was it?" asked Shakeel.

"Last night sir at 13, Red Hills," said Karim.

"Are you sure about our jurisdiction?" asked Shakeel, who was newly posted there.

"Very much, sir," said Karim unable to hide his irritation as if the question questioned his procedural knowledge.

"Who're the dead?"

"Man and his mistress, sir."

"What if it's a suicide pact?"

"No sir, they could've been poisoned by the man's wife."

"What makes you think so?"

"Pravar told me, sir?"

"Who's he by the way?"

"He's the dead woman's brother, sir."

"What else did he say?"

"He said that Radha the murderess is on the run ever since."

"Let me 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 dwelling 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 *kaara boondi* for company. When Shakeel surveyed the scene there, Pravar ushered them into the adjacent bedroom, where Madhu and Mala lay dead on a double cot bed. Soon, as the forensic squad, present by then, was at work, providing Radha's photograph to Shakeel, Pravar made out a case of her poisoning the couple.

Leaving the corpses to Karim's care, when Shakeel returned to the police station with the suspect's photograph, he was surprised to find her there 'to aid the investigation'.

But in spite of her pleas of innocence, Shakeel, influenced by Pravar's assertions, could not but see her hand in the double murder, and so arraigned her as the sole suspect. Not only that, even though his sustained custodial interrogation failed to crack her, believing in her guilt, so as to extracting her confession, he brought every police trick up his sleeve into play, including the third degree, but to no avail. Eventually however, he had to set her free, owing to the judicial intervention, but 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 insulate herself. So as to preempt her move, he had set out that evening to 9, Castle Hills, even in that inclement weather.

While Dhruva was grappling with that sum and substance of Shakeel's recollection of the bygone incident, the cop said in a lighter vein that if she were to come under the detective'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" said Dhruva jocularly; and then assuming a serious look he wanted to know from the cop if he had noticed a pretty woman at the bend. But 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 ear to the underworld. And 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, the detective led the cop into the study, where the latter poured out the problems the death of Madhu, and Mala posed to the investigation.

On Pravar's account, Madhu was hell-bent on divorcing Radha and that would have left her in the dire straits; won't that be an enough motive, apart from her rivalry with the other woman, to poison her man and his mistress. Never mind her alibi that she was away with her friend when the illicit couple drank the poisoned liquor to their death, won't her possible means to poison the drink make her the prime suspect. So her motive to murder them made it an open-and-shut case; there was no difficulty in guessing that after somehow poisoning the drink, she might have picked up a quarrel with them as an excuse to leave them in a huff. But yet for Shakeel, her alibi had become a big hurdle for him to cross over to pin her down, more so as she withstood the sustained interrogation and came out clean in the lie-detector test as well!

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 what if, as a wounded tigress, she prowled on its prey in the garb of a lamb. With the detective evincing a keen interest in the perplexing case, the relieved cop savored the hot *pakodas* that Raju had fetched, all the while detailing his investigation that led him nowhere. 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 served them some Darjeeling tea, he 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, if indeed it were she, Shakeel wouldn't have failed to spot her from a mile, even though the weather was foggy for a proper sight. And in spite of her compelling face, he

himself might fail to recognize 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 the cop thought, come to seduce him so as to stall Shakeel's future maneuvers? If it were so, why should she have been so tentative to begin with only to beat 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.

Even as he 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 dead mistress. Soon though, he changed into his shorts and took the pet for a stroll in the twilight, by which time the drains got cleared to let the roads wear a fresh look to glisten under the newly lit streetlights. However, as the roadside trees were set to dry up themselves, the pet and its master got wet, and with the chilly winds too making it uneasy for them, as Dicey turned its tail homewards, Dhruva led it home, where Raju said that someone was waiting for him in the anteroom.

Chapter 3

Ranjit's Predicament

As Dhruva stepped into the anteroom, he came face to face with a handsome man with an anxious 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 the *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 lives with his childless spouse in the *Spandan*, their bungalow in Jubilee Hills; while he is an engineer, she has a L.L.B. added to M.A. in English, and yet at his behest, she remained a homemaker for he was averse to a working wife. Of late though, having become a bored housewife, as she was 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 short stint as his 'assistant' could come in handy in her career pursuit as a criminal lawyer. Aware though he was about the hazards such an occupation posed, as there was no way of stopping her for once she makes up her mind, there was no going back for her, damn the consequences. So, on the way to his office, he posted her application for the post that very morning, of course, without visualizing that by the evening, he would be seeking the advertiser's help in rescuing the applicant from her kidnappers! But as Ranjit said that he was unable to fathom the vicissitudes of fate, the unexpected development made Dhruva ponder over the imponderables of life.

As for the details, Ranjit said that as Kavya's Alto was in the garage, she telephoned him after lunch to know if he could spare his Audi for her to reach her friend's place by three-thirty; but given his own hopping schedule of the day, he asked her to be on her own by hiring an auto. Nevertheless, when it started raining heavily by three, he thought it fit to send her his car, so he tried to reach her over phone but as he failed to connect with the land line as well as her mobile, he called up her friend, who told him that she hasn't reached there yet. When he realized that Kavya didn't make it there even at four, he rushed to *Spandan*, only to find a ransom note slipped in through the

main door, which warned him not to approach the cops. However, saying that as Dhruva was fresh in his mind, he came to seek his help regardless, Ranjit handed over the missive to him, which read:

Ranjitji, ensure your presence tomorrow evening at the Tanesha statue on the Tank Bund from four to six in dark trousers and a white shirt to convey your consent to pay three-crore rupees in thousand denominations (less luggage, more comfort, for us all) to reclaim your wife. Thereafter, you have only four days to exchange your black money with your bright wife; so whenever you are ready with the money for the barter before the deadline that is, be present at the Tanesha between five and eight in the evening (mind the dress code) to take further instructions. But 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. Also be warned, if you carry any mobile phone with you, we will take the booty as well as your wife over your dead body.

Yours expectantly,

Your wife's captor

Testified by

Sd/-

Kavya Ranjit

When Ranjit confirmed that it was Kavya's signature in that otherwise unsigned note, as Dhruva secured it and said that they may better alert the cops, Ranjit said sarcastically that for that instead of coming to the Castle Hills, he could have directly gone to the Jubilee Hills Police Station. But as Dhruva sternly retorted 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 for the accusation. By way of response, the detective said nonchalantly that since there was no way for Ranjit to receive the ransom note with his wife's signature on it, within an hour or so after her alleged kidnap, he should be put under the scanner above all else. Unnerved though by the proposition but appreciating Dhruva's mental acumen and eye for detail, Ranjit confessed that preoccupied with his official chores, he not only failed to track Kavya's whereabouts after his call to her friend at four but also reached home late in the evening, and added that he just tried to test the waters before he entrusted the case to him.

As though to outsmart Ranjit, Dhruva turned naughty and said that since Kavya's signature was genuine, it indeed was a good news; but as Ranjit seemed lost at the comment, lest he should take him for a cynic, Dhruva explained that if it were a forgery, it would have meant that the captors were out to barter her body for the booty. Then Ranjit, who remained apprehensive, said what if Kavya was bumped off after having obtained her signature, Dhruva had assured him that the kidnapers were no morons to harm her as he 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 kidnaps a woman for ransom, his lure for money would act as her chastity belt; moreover, as the handwriting in the missive betrayed a feminine slant, the captor was either a woman or a male with a female accomplice, possibly a lover; if the kidnapper were to be a woman, then there may be no violation but for a lesbian aberration, and were it to be a man-woman enterprise, then any male enthusiasm for Kavya's possession would have to contend with the female proclivity of his accomplice to stall the same; whatever, the idea of kidnap could be to collect ransom from the man and not to molest his wife.

When Dhruva wanted to know Ranjit's financial position to pay the ransom, just in case it's inevitable, he said that he came to seek his help as he did not have so much money to cough up, and that prompted Dhruva to say in jest that he was no moneylender; but as Ranjit offered to pay him half a million to bust the kidnappers, Dhruva said that it might come in handy as and when he handled the cases of the 'hand to mouths'. At that as Ranjit offered to take Dhruva to the *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 him 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.

Chapter 4 **Rags to Riches**

Kavya, a child prodigy, was the only offspring of a financially hard-pressed couple from Kovvur, on the banks of the Godavari. 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 catering for a couple of working women's hostels, 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 promising nobody with a potential to become somebody', as he put it. 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 Lord Balaji's precincts 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 ownership lap.

By the time Ranjit finished the recap of his life and times with Kavya, as they reached Road No. 69 in the Jubilee Hills that leads up to the *Spandan*, Dhruva brought the Esteem to a halt at the street corner. Letting Ranjit go down the desolate road, and wanting to be alerted on the mobile just in case, the detective stayed back to see if anyone waited in the wings. When it was all clear, Dhruva followed suit by focusing his torch all the way on the road, and entering the compound, he observed the rain-drenched pathway 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.

Then stepping into the *Spandan* proper and having scanned the insides, when Dhruva wanted to see Kavya's photograph, Ranjit handed him her photo album; and struck by her stunning features stunning looks, he felt that they could be the portrayals of her fabulous persona. While envisioning the poise of the vivacious woman, who would have become his assistant in the normal course, the detective wondered whether her kidnapping would be the loss of his lifetime. But when the impropriety of holding on to the album dawned on him, he handed it back to Ranjit with the assurance that she would be back in her man's arms before he started missing her.

Soon, revealing the opening moves of the *Operation Checkmate* to set Kavya free from her kidnappers, and leaving Ranjit thereafter, Dhruva called up Shakeel, on his mobile, wanting him to set the informers behind the usual suspects. However, as the cop broached the topic of Radha, recalling the mysterious trespasser, the detective

wondered if the temptress was indeed a murderess and whether she would ever venture into 9, Castle Hills or not might as well lie in her destiny.

Back home, after a quick shower, with his favorite Old Monk with Thumbs Up for company, Dhruva began working on various moves of the endgame, and soon succeeded in affecting a mental checkmate of Kavya's captors. But, the thought that she may 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.

However, 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; if only Shakeel had showed him her photograph that Pravar gave him, and wondered why he failed seek it himself? But feeling that it won't behoove well to ask for it afresh, he cursed his lack of the presence of mind, but nevertheless thought that maybe, as a seductress, Radha could rival Mithya but there could be no temptresses like Kavya for sure. Besides, won't Kavya be an invaluable asset even if she were half as cerebral as her husband pictured her? When it suits him to have either Kavya or Radha to assist him, what a bonus it could be if both of them joined 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. But then, after all this mess, would she like to join him?

What with the myriad thoughts about them continued to storm his head; he had a disturbed sleep that long night.

Chapter 5

Dhruva's Dilemma

Waking up early and finishing his chores readily, Dhruva found himself in the portico, fixing his stare at the gate, though wondering at his obsession for an unknown dame, possibly a murderess. Having had his breakfast there itself, and weary after a long vigil thereafter, as if he became wiser to the hopeless wait, he retreated into his study and lost himself in fine-tuning the *Operation Checkmate* of Kavya's captors. So, when Raju appeared at the lunch-time, he wanted to have his meal in the study itself; and after his prolonged siesta, grabbing the mail that was fetched to him, he found the expected application from Kavya and an unexpected letter from one Radha Rani, C/o. Begumpet Post Office.

'How ingeniously inviting; is she the alleged murderess?' he thought having read the latter. '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 suffix of Devi; but sans the suffix, could this Radha be the real one or merely her namesake? Isn't the duality of the possibility intriguing, but whoever it is, can she be as good as Mithya where it matters? But of what avail her eagerness if she were to be a plain thing; why won't she spare me the perils of attraction in the portals of proximity. At any rate, for man's peace of mind the serene presence of an un-alluring dame serves better than the flirty tempest of a desirable woman. But then, sans the tumult of the heart, can there be life in life; oh, how the absence of woman is killing!'

Given her eagerness for the job, Dhruva felt that waiting for his reply, Rani could be right up there at the post office, 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 post, he was amused at his fickle mindedness for having given precedence to an unknown woman over someone he 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 her *Spandan*, and who knows, after the dust settles down, she may not be averse to answer my call. Whatever, Ranjit should be cautioned not to let her know about my involvement in the *Operation Checkmate* for 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 could be? But then, why place the cart before the horse, or horses to be precise, when life would take its own course anyway.'

When the clock struck four, attired in black trousers and a white shirt - Dhruva thought of dressing 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 - he stepped out of his abode to step into an auto. Soon reaching the Tank Bund, and alighting from it at the Nannaya statue, he walked up to the nearby Siddhendrayogi's; and finding Ranjit at the Tanesha's, he himself settled nearby 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.

Then around five, a white Maruti Zen, driven by a twenty-something guy, slowed down as it neared the Tanesha from the Ranigunj side, and 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. Since the suspect came alone to pick up Ranjit's signal of consent, the detective reasoned that his accomplice, possibly the woman who penned the ransom note, might have held back holding Kavya in captivity. Though he 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 expected arrival, Shakeel came to him seeking his helping hand to close in on an inter-state counterfeit-note racket that came to the fore just then. 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 her, in case she turned up, he accompanied the cop to the Saifabad Police Station.

After burning a lot of midnight oil at the police station along with the cop, the detective developed a blueprint of the *Operation Moolah* for the former to fine-tune its logistical aspects; and thereafter as he reached home, fearing that he might have missed the date with Rani, Raju informed him that none came to see him.

'How I hoped this woman would fill in the void; am I flattered to be deceived?' he thought in all disappointment.

What with his obsession for Rani that accentuated the pain of his year-long 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 though, as his thoughts insensibly turned to Kavya, he felt that had Oscar Wilde espied her, perhaps he might have paraphrased his smoking quote as an ode to her - the perfect example of a perfect beauty - and began to wonder what would have happened had she, instead of being kidnapped, made it to 9, Castle Hills.

Thus he spent the rest of the night imagining the possibilities till his tiredness induced him into a deep sleep.

Chapter 6

The Gatecrasher

While Dhruva was still lounging in his bed, as Raju announced the arrival of a middle-aged woman, wondering whether it could be Rani, he asked him to make her feel at home in the study before he could meet her there. Thereafter, as Dhruva took his sweet time to put his best foot forward, Raju began lifting him to the skies before her, but when he heard approaching footsteps, 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, ogling at her unabashedly as he turned ecstatic in his approach, enamored of him, she turned coy, making him all the more covetous. What's more, as he advanced towards her, bowled by his masculinity, 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. So, while he opened his arms impulsively, parting her lips sanguinely, she sank into his arms amorously, and as if to cement their union, he closed in on them passionately. Then, induced by his ardency, though her femininity came to the fore, and his dream came true, she unlocked his lips, as if to regain her breath. Thereby, as 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 just tried to test the waters before venturing into the whirlpool of his life, she reached for his lips all again.

Then, gripping her in his ardent embrace, when he 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, she said alluringly that she came for the kill and so he was better be on guard against her ambush. But 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 single-mindedness; and as he hugged her endearingly, smug in his embrace, she said coyly that she craved for a live-in with him. Then as 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 beseech them to 'let her in' so that she could 'let him in'. When he told her 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. Thus enthralled by his romanticism, as she lifted him to her bosom, he led her into his bedroom, 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.

And for his part, 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 cited 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 there. However, at five, after making a couple of rounds, as the explorer sped away towards Ranigunj, the intruder in satisfaction left the place to reach home in anticipation.

Back home, as the thrill of finding Rani-in-wait seemed so reminiscent of his times with Mithya, he told her how he looked forward to her filling the emotional void in his lonely life. When she teased him that after having had his fill with her, he might as well be craving for a refill with his dream girl Radha, leading her to the liquor-cabinet, he told

her that she might as well fathom his mind by keeping him high. Saying that she was a game for it, she opted for the 'ladies' Gin when he offered her 'manly' Rum, and having had a couple of drinks they ate Vimala's 'spicy' preparations with great relish only to rush into his bedroom. What with her 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.

Waking up late and having had an exhilarating day with the doting live-in, in the evening, he took her along with him to the Tank Bund, where she strolled around the place and 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, he 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.

Chapter 7

Operation Checkmate

When it was 4 P.M the D-day, though 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. Even though she said that she was fine, yet he drove her to the Hyderabad Nursing Home, where the doctor ruled out even a hairline fracture, but ignoring her pleas to be taken along with him, he sent her home with Raju, whom he brought along with them.

Shortly thereafter, reaching the nearby Tank Bund, he quickly made it to 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, and alighting from his car with two bulging travel bags, and visibly nervous, he 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 taste their recopies, 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*, he began chitchatting 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. But as Ranjit tended to hold on to it, the guy snatched it away from him, and waited in the wings without taking his eyes off him. Soon, when it got a little darker, he signaled to Ranjit to go down the staircase in the backside that led to the road below; so when Ranjit picked up the luggage and ventured into the vault of that staircase, the guy called someone on his mobile; and abandoning his wares as is where, as he too followed suit, Dhruva reached for his mobile.

Shortly thereafter the detective noticed a young woman, her face hidden in the *pallu* of her sari, emerge from the staircase and walk towards the Maruti Zen, and discerning the excitement in her nervous gait, he knew that she was the accomplice of Kavya's captor. However, arraigning her was not a part of the *Operation Checkmate*, he let her drive away in the white Maruti Zen; moreover, without espying her visage, yet he had experienced an unusual empathy for her.

Soon thereafter, 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 ethereal charms that paled his photographic visualizations into insignificance.

However, the breaking news from Shakeel that the culprit turned out to be Pravar diverted his mind to the mysterious Radha, the suspected murderess. Amazed though at the development, he turning business-like, wanted the cop 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, she blamed 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 indulgences.

Chapter 8

Foul on Pravar

On reaching home, and seeing Rani at the gate, Dhruva could realize how eager she was to hear it all from the horse's mouth. So, as if to drive home his empathy at her having missed to see the exciting race, lighting his cigar, he began his narrative in the portico, and she said that in the excitement of it, the aroma of the *lanka pogaku* was more exhilarating than ever. Ending his move with the rescue of the captive, he said that for the checkmate of the captor, they have to wait for Shakeel to come on air at 9.

So, tuning into TV9, they began having their drinks; and in time, Shakeel was seen on the screen along with a handcuffed youth, whom he named as Pravar, the kingpin of the fake-note racket that he had busted that evening. As Karim laid some 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, why his body language spoke all lies," said Rani

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

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

"What struck me in the ransom note was the kidnappers' choice of the 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 the *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 suggested that they could hit upon a foolproof plan to facilitate the *Operation Exchange*. But why were they specific that Ranjit should wait near the Tanesha statue; surveying its environs, I could see a nearby vaulted staircase that led to the roadside Maisamma temple down below."

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

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

"Why, it's better late than never," she said.

"But 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 wasn't difficult to visualize the envisaged plan of exchanging the *maal* for the moolah; even as the male captor would deal with Ranjit on the Tank Bund, his female accomplice would hold Kavya on the road below, usually desolated at that hour. And once Ranjit is made to go down the staircase with the ransom, Kavya could be led up for the operation exchange midway with the violators blocking the way both ways. Even if someone happened 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 in the escape vehicles, one parked on the Tank Bund, and the other stationed nearby Maisamma Temple."

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

"No denying that but ironically it's the brilliance of the plan that betrayed their idea behind it," said Dhruva. "Initially 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 on my part to make him fall in line."

Though Rani admired him for his ingenuous idea, Dhruva said that on second thoughts, he felt that it was morally reprehensible and conceptually unethical; and 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 her cynical enterprise, and like him, she too would not like to repeat it. Puzzled by her mane and manner, though he pressed her to confide in him, but smiling sweetly, she said that he might as well wait for she was not running away from him right then. At that, he said in jest that he would break her legs to stop her from leaving him, and she reminded him coquettishly that she was within his arms reach, so even as he took her into his arms, he received a call from Shakeel.

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

Chapter 9

Stockholm Syndrome

Next day, when Ranjit reached 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva was playing shuttle badminton with Rani in its backyard, and as Raju announced his 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 that she better eavesdrop as he closeted with her man. Chiding him for wanting to spoil her morals, she got into the swimming pool, and he went into the study to meet the visitor.

Dismissing his apologies for having kept him waiting, Ranjit lost no time in blaming him for the fake-notes mess he had created for him, though falling short of demanding compensation for the damage caused. Turning apologetic for not having taken him into confidence, the culprit explained to the aggrieved that had he been privy to the plan, he would have probably fumbled in handling Pravar, and that would have put his wife's life at risk. However, Ranjit bemoaned that Kavya was cut up with him for playing foul with Pravar for he treated her fairly in her captivity.

At length, cajoled by Dhruva that all that would come to a pass, Ranjit placed the Kavya-cards on the table - in the pouring rain, around three that day, she stepped out of the *Spandan* wondering how to hire an auto; what a hassle it was in Hyderabad 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 asked her if she would like to accommodate the hapless lass, out of humanitarian consideration, she consented to his proposition.

However, the next thing that she 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. Though she kept mum initially 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 trick a woman on the sly. But when he asked Natya to leave him alone to enable him to assess her womanly worth, afraid of rape, she agreed to cooperate. When he thought of a ransom of five-crore rupees, she told him that he might forget about it; and even as he scaled it down to three-crores, yet as she protested, but he told her that she might count her days if her man was not prepared to cough up even that much.

While confining her in the guestroom of at desolated house on the outskirts, and having warned her against any misadventure, they took turns to guard her, lest she should give them a slip. Though Pravar was younger to her by twelve years, but whenever she was alone with him, she was ever in fright that he might turn eager for her; and during the nights, though he was fast asleep on the floor, holding the rope that tied both her hands, keeping an eye on him, lying on the cot, she used to keep awake all night. However, 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. So, when she told him that once freed, she might practice law, he said jocularly 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 kidnap.

Asked about his rendezvous on the Tank Bund, Ranjit said that after verifying the ransom money and ensuring that there were no khakis around in the *mufti*; Pravar let him talk to Kavya on the mobile phone. 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 the vault with the booty. Moved by his concern for her, though his wife thanked him all the way to the *Spandan*, but seeing Shakeel implicate Pravar in the fake-note case in that TV presser, she became so furious that she wanted an explanation from him. When he told her that he had no inkling about it at all, she saw it as a dirty trick of the police to serve their own ends, and he tried to pacify her by saying that, in either case, Pravar had to serve the sentence. However, maintaining that it was no justification for such falsification, she said that Pravar used to joke about her carrying his briefs and wondered aloud what if she took up his case.

While Ranjit lamented that he was at a loss to understand Kavya's inexplicable behavior, cautioning him not to let her ever get wiser to the nuances of her rescue act, Dhruva counseled him to keep his cool while she got over her nerves. But harping on how the misadventure had upset his mate, Ranjit wondered of what avail it all was, and thus having put her rescuer on the back foot, he extricated himself from his commitment by handing the latter a cheque for a paltry twenty-thousand. Measuring Ranjit's meanness in that meager amount, yet the detective told him to call on him if he ever needed any help, and as an after-thought enquired about the fate of his call letter to his wife. Glad for being saved from playing the blame game, Ranjit said that having read it, without a comment, his wife 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 that he was worried that the foisted case on Pravar might end up hurting Kavya in wayward ways; and urged by Rani to elaborate his conjecture, he elucidated the intriguing aspects 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 rather than with her mean man, who came to enjoy her father's bequeath by default."

"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 perplexities of human psychology," said Dhruva. "Coming back 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 as well; and given Ranjit's presumed deceitfulness towards Pravar, she might begin to lean towards her ex-captor even more. What is 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 even 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 is 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."

Chapter 10

An Aborted Affair

When Rani proposed a trip to Ooty to let him bide his time as she did his bidding, Dhruva pitched in for 'train journey', but as she wanted to 'air dash' so as not to 'lose time', they boarded an Indian Airlines flight that very evening. Upon landing at the airport, on their way to a star-hotel, even as the serene surroundings of the hill resort refreshed his mind, her innate romanticism too insensibly enamored his heart; and once ensconced in the hotel suite, making it their love nest, they rarely ventured out of it.

Soon, amidst the 'time of their lives', Ranjit him rang up to lament over the ugly turn of the events in his vexatious life.

Kavya went to the Cherlapalli jail to apologize to Pravar for what had happened, and as the culprit played up to her psyche by exaggerating his plight, she became obsessive about earning him a reprieve, and disregarding his objection, she took up her ex-captor's *vakalat*, making him wonder where all that would lead her to; so he was at a loss as to how to wean her away from that vagabond.

Dismayed at the unforeseen development, Dhruva said that it was better that Ranjit kept his cool for the best course of action seemed to be inaction then; he also advised him to leave her alone until she got over her obsession for any hurdles he might place in her way could only buttress her resolve to surmount them, leading her to a disastrous end. Though he tried to shore up Ranjit's spirits, he himself was saddened that the beauty he coveted has come under the emotional grip of the beast of his own creation, he couldn't warm up even to Rani he began to love.

However, as he began to resign himself to her fate, making it a double jeopardy for him, soon, a furious Shakeel rang him up to recount how Kavya had hauled him over the coals in the court hall on Pravar's account. She urged the judge to take note of the fact that Pravar was a petty thief and not a mafia don as is being made out by the police, and drove home the point that as he was the sole accused, it was inconceivable that he single-handedly ran a multi-crore fake-notes racket. Besides, arguing that Shakeel had foisted a false case on her client; she suggested that the cop could've seized the booty while the bootleggers gave him the slip, or who knew, he might have let them off at the behest of the powers that be; so to cover up his lapses, and to earn some false laurels, he made Pravar the fall guy.

That was not all, she produced Natya in the court, who sensationally revealed that not only Kavya had stayed with Pravar and her for four days prior to his arrest but also she accompanied them to the Tank Bund in the very car in which the fake currency notes were allegedly found by the police. She also swore that having parked the car nearby Maisamma Temple, all three of them went up to the Tank Bunk to relax and recreate, and at some point, as Kavya complained of headache, Pravar went down to fetch the Saridon tablets kept in their car, and it was then that he was apprehended by the police to foist the fake-notes case on him. 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. Thus 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.

Then, a dumbfounded Dhruva had to strain every nerve to convince Shakeel that their failure was owing to the 'Stockholm Syndrome' that he had failed to factor in while fashioning the *Operation Checkmate*; and having vented his anger against Kayva, the cop stunned the detective by revealing, as if as an afterthought, about Pravar's damning admission, during the interrogation, of having poisoned his sister and her lover, and vowed to book him for the double murder. However, seeing the futility of apprehending Pravar, based on his confession in police custody, for any novice of a lawyer could induce the court to set him free for want of evidence, the detective advised the cop to better guard himself against the wounded Pravar.

Nursing his self-inflicted wounds thereafter, and having realized that his meaningless obsession with Radha failed his investigative logic in heading towards Pravar, Dhruva felt ashamed of his professional incompetence. That his ill-conceived idea to bring the fake notes into the ransom play has come to derange Kavya and embarrass Shakeel has only added to his depressive feeling. Thus, with the damage done and his pride dented, he showed no inclination to return to action, though the cop was ever on the phone to goad him to be back soon.

However, as 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 but a fleeting moment of their passion. So, when he sought her hand in marriage, she sought to excuse herself, and perplexed by her inexplicable rebuff, he became unrelenting in his pleas; but as she disclosed that she was a married woman, he was aghast beyond belief. Nonetheless, bowled by her charms, though he insisted that she divorce her man to adorn his life, she remained unmoved, and devastated by her refusal to yield, he demanded to know what prompted her to become such a heartless flirt.

Rani's parents hailed from Waltair, where she graduated in arts; after which as 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 their union on caste considerations, her parents were in a hurry to give her hand to Satish, who they thought was a suitable boy in every way. So, as Ramesh continued to dilly dally even though she ran out of excuses to spurn Satish's hand, she forced the issue with her lover, who revealed that he was already a married man; and shaken to the core, she married the latter to repair her life as his wife.

What with Satish's charm and wit inducing warmth in her jilted life, she soon got over the bitterness of her betrayed past; so they had been reaping the fruits of their conjugation, well past the seven year itch, though without laying the seeds of it, which was the only hitch in their blessed match. Maybe to make up for that lacking, as Satish got obsessed with his career to the exclusion of all else, she came to bear the brunt of her barrenness; and what's worse, three years back, he developed an ambition to start a mega venture of his own, which only turned their home into his office in the offing. So, as courted his career with passion, keeping her libido in the cold, she began entertaining the idea of an extramarital affair.

When she made up her mind to spice up her life in a liaison, as she recalled Ramesh's trickery, her erotic idea came to acquire a vengeful edge, inducing her to develop an urge to play *a la Ramesh* with a man to get even with him in the man's world. It was then that she recalled the cop who had put her cousin Ashok's murder under the carpet, over which he led his murderess wife to the altar, and that motivated her to avenge the foul play. But when she came to know that Mithya the killer was no more and her cop lover became Detective Dhruva, she came to see him as an ideal target for her sexual revenge as well.

While she was upbeat at that thought, coinciding with Satish's exploratory visit to the U.S for a business tie-up, appeared Dhruva's ad for an assistant lady sleuth; it was her idea to incite his curiosity by loitering at the gate that rainy day as a prelude to taking him into her revengeful arms. But soon, lost in his passion, she lost her appetite for revenge, and as he began to love her too, she developed an urge to bear his child; so she would have loved to make love to him until she had missed her periods, but as her man was due by the weekend; it was time she ended her sojourn with him, but for all she knew, their child might well be in the offing.

Aghast at that, as a despaired Dhruva begged her to divorce her man and marry him; she said that she would rather stick to her husband than tie up with a philanderer like him. Even though he vouched for his eternal fidelity, as she didn't yield on the emotional ground, so as to turn her around, he played up to her ego by praising her beauty and brains no end. But unmoved still, as she said that he being a ladies' man, there wouldn't be any dearth of desirable mates for him, he begged her not to make it a sudden death to his ardor and continue their liaison till he could master his emotions. Still remaining unrelenting, as she said that it was no way to make the best of the hoped for change in her life, he retorted by saying that she was being cruel to him; and yet maintaining that it was part of life, she told him that he would be able to put all that behind him as soon as he fancies some dame.

Chapter 11 ***Psyche of Revenge***

When a dejected Dhruva returned home alone that evening, Raju informed him that some 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 the coveted Radha, whom, after Shakeel's revelation, he came to pity as well, so he thought. Whatever, to catch up with the lost time and to get back to the brass-tacks of his business, he invited the cop to review the *Operation Checkmate* afresh over a couple of drinks.

Lying in wait in *mufti* near Maisamma temple, said Shakeel sipping 'Teachers' on the rocks, he sighted the earmarked Santro, driven by a young woman. After she brought the vehicle to a halt, nearby the roadside shrine, he alerted the patrol parties stationed at all the exit points. When he was nearly tired of keeping focus on the target in that dim light, he saw the woman alight from the car along with Kavya, whom she readily led into the vaulted staircase abutting the in-built temple. Shortly thereafter, he had seen a familiar looking figure emerge from the staircase with the handbags that he himself had arranged for the *Operation Checkmate*. While the guy was about to get into the Santro, a Skoda passed him by, and in the flash of its headlights, he was surprised to realize that he was none other than Pravar himself. However, when the rogue steered the car towards the Ramakrishna Mutt Road, he had alerted the patrol party in wait near the *Dharna Chowk*, and by the time, he himself joined them, they had already nabbed the stunned culprit. But it was his own turn to be shocked, when, during interrogation, Pravar revealed his hidden hand in the unresolved double murder of Madhu and Mala.

Sparing the cop with his barbs for once, the detective wanted a picture of the captor's background to bring the captive's perturbed psyche to the foreground. So began Shakeel to sketch Pravar's skewed past.

Mala was ten when Pravar was born, and soon thereafter, as their mother became sickly, their father took to drinking, further denting their family's meager resources. What with a drunkard father to contend with, a sickly mother to attend to and a younger sibling to provide for, Mala began to mature more than her age. However, when her brother was ten, their father kicked the bucket, and shortly thereafter, thanks to her good looks and a relative's good samaritanism, Suraiah, a measly clerk in the civil works department, came into her life as her man. Just the same, she was discomfited as he turned out to be utterly miserly, for she believed that a *paisa* well-spent was far more worthy than a hoarded rupee, but soon, as her mother too died, making her brother an orphan, her husband, in spite of his reservations, had to accommodate him in their home. Pravar was fourteen then.

Sadly, that arrangement 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: while his physical proximity to her insensibly induced in him a sub-conscious sexual affinity with her, her marital closeness with the man he abhorred inexorably bred a sexual jealousy in him. And that made him an awkward being, perturbing Mala and annoying Suraiah but attracting Rajan, a hardened criminal, who took him under his tutelage. As his wayward ways that followed made his brother-in-law take jibe at his sister, it further fuelled his subconscious oneness with her; but when his nemesis died in a road mishap, with no rival to her affections, he began to dote upon her like never before, which suited her as well, for it catered to her innate need for male attention.

In time though, as she was absorbed in the department on compassionate grounds, she began leaning towards Madhu, her enamored boss, and for its part, destiny that scripts its acts in life's plays with some denouement in mind, enabled Rajan to trick a young Natya into eloping with him. And that proved to be a double jeopardy for Pravar; bitten by Natya's charms, even as he was eyeing her, seeing it as a travesty of his devotion to Mala, he was beset by qualms. But soon though, further accentuating his mental distress, as Mala became Madhu's keep, and seeing her dote on the new man in her life, he was truly depressed. Soon, as Madhu reduced his young son Raghu into Mala's errand boy, Pravar took up cudgels with his sister on the boy's behalf, but perceiving that was the privilege of a mistress, she paid a deaf ear to his protestations. As a result, he came to identify himself more and more with the hapless boy, and that made him resent her liaison with the tormentor even more.

However, at length, abetted by him, when Raghu rebelled, an irate Madhu said that for all he knew, he could be a bastard, and humiliated thus, as the hapless boy committed suicide on the railway tracks; Pravar felt that Madhu had no right to live, and so also his sister, who was no less callous either. What's worse, he came to perceive Radha as a cock-pecked wife, unmindful of her son's plight, and that evaporated the sympathy he felt for her as a neglected wife, owing to his sister's trespass into her marital life. So, strangely, it was his sense of righteousness that steeled Pravar's heart against the disparate trio.

Thus, even as he was morally low, the lifting of prohibition, ending the bootlegging in the State, had hurt him monetarily as well. It was then that Rajan thought of wriggling out of the tight spot through the extortions from kidnappings. But what with the dangerous pursuit emboldening him even more, Pravar developed the nerve to kill, and waited for the opportune moment as by then Madhu started mixing his women by taking Mala home. So, he worked on a plan to eliminate the three of them without soiling his hands that developed the skill to tamper with bottle seals in his bootlegging days. Being aware that under Madhu's influence, Mala took to drinking, he presumed that Radha must be a habitual drinker too, so he poisoned a bottle of Teacher's Scotch, and waited for the day that Madhu and Mala gloated over as their Union Day. So on that U-day, he presented the 'bottle of death', sans his fingerprints, to Mala for their cynical celebration with the lost out wife. When Mala said that Radha was 'no game for that', he said in jest that they might as well leave the dregs for her to rue later, and true to his word, he implicated 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 eliminate Rajan to usurp his woman, and waited for the right opportunity, which presented itself soon enough. That midnight, the three of them were in wait at a secluded spot in Shamirpet to collect a hefty ransom from a businessman, whose kid they kidnapped the day

before. While Rajan and Pravar waited for the father at the exchange site, holding the kid, Natya positioned herself at a safe distance. When the father met them with the ransom amount, Pravar went up to Natya to fetch the kid for the barter; but on the way back to her with the booty, he shot his benefactor dead, which he pictured it to her as a police action, and the cops too publicized it as such to score a few Brownie points of 'law and order'.

Having split the booty with Natya and thus having gained her trust, he induced her to marry him, after which, even though she urged him to give up his wayward ways, as he desisted, being too far down the road of crime by then; she had no choice but to keep pace with him. Thus while he planned the next kidnap, wiser for the possible police action while collecting the ransom in a secluded location, he conceived the ingenious rendezvous on the busy Tank Bund with its sparsely used staircase to the road below. What with Natya playing her part to perfection, they almost pulled it off, but only fell short owing to Dhruva's uncanny foresight into their plan though without any hindsight.

Chapter 12

Victim of Trust

Next day, waking up earlier than usual, Dhruva began sipping his bed-coffee in the portico, thinking about the inimical twists and turns in Radha's chequered life; and had a gut feeling that it was she, who came to see him the other day. Even as his newfound empathy for her, coupled with his earlier fascination, seized him with an urge to see her, Dicey began to bark; so glancing at the gate, and seeing a fascinating woman, he readily lost his heart to her, but having been bitten once and thinking it's better to be twice shy, though she approached him seductively, he subdued himself consciously. Just the same, when she introduced herself, 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. Studious and methodical, she even excelled at her studies that is relatively speaking, and seemed to be well on the way to become a Chartered Accountant after her parents' dreams. However, when she crossed eighteen, her life went awry for she lost her heart to a handsome newcomer in their locality, whose identity she preferred not to reveal, for the world was small after all. What with love ruling her head, fuelled by his wooing, she failed to apply her mind at her studies to end up at the bottom of the class, and her father, who had all along entertained visions of seeing her in the chartered mould of 'Brahmaiah', was aghast at her poor academic showing. When he sought her explanation about her low scores, she showed him her lover's letters vouching eternal devotion to her, and that left him with no choice but to approach the boy's father, who roundly blamed her for enticing his son, and outraged by the slur, her father asked her to break up with him.

However, as her lover assured her that he would prevail over his parents in the end, blinded by love and guided by fate, she carried on with him on the sly, but as her escapades came to her father's notice, he strictly restricted her movements, and started looking for a match for her. So, she eloped with him when she was barely nineteen and they got married in a temple; while her disgusted father disowned her, his unreconciled parents began weaning him away from her. However, the fortuitous presence of an aunt of her childhood friend in that town afforded her some badly needed succor and support.

Soon, however, as he came to wilt under the emotional blackmail of his parents, his will to stick to her through thick and thin began to wane, and thus, even as she was

hard-pressed to hold him, his father upped the ante by pitting his 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, the envisaged beauty of the bride-to-be proved to be an appetizer for his lust, so he came to perceive her as a drag on his promising life. As if the prospect of losing him was not nightmarish enough, she missed her periods, regardless of which, he deserted her heartlessly, and that sealed her fate. Thus, left in the lurch, as she burnt her bridges with her parents, so in desperation, she returned to her native to contact that friend, her full-soul mate, and her half-namesake, but in vain.

Then seeing a twitch on Dhruva's brow, she thought that some namesake of hers might have stirred his heart before, and he, staring at her, wondered what if she were to jilt him like half-namesake.

When she learned that her friend, having married in the meantime, moved out of town by then, Radha resumed the recap of her life and times; she turned to an elderly man she knew from her childhood days to help her find a job. But as he tried to snare her into a relationship, which made her realize the pitfalls of a single woman in the man's world, swallowing her pride, as a prodigal daughter, she returned home to her parents' subdued welcome. However, 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 began dragging her feet, her father told her either to abort her child or wed that Engineer. With the lurking danger her bulging belly posed, she bowed her head to let Madhu tie the knot, and he, blinded by her beauty, not only turned blind to her reticence in their nuptial bed but also failed to grasp the import of the early arrival of her son, Raghu; whom she came to dote upon, more out of a sense of guilt than an affection for the man who fathered him; but somehow Madhu was never enamored of him, though not out of any suspicion.

However, it took the seven-year itch for her man to get wind of her conjugal indifference towards him, and that hurt his ego and crushed his heart; well, 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 the prostitutes, fetched by his bribe money, and even as she thought that life couldn't get worse than that, fate had other indignities in store for her.

When someone from his department died in an accident, Mala, his widow, with a brother to support, was absorbed on compassionate grounds; and he lost no time in ingratiating with her, picturing himself as a neglected husband, deprived of woman's affections and all. Succumbing to his falsity, owe be to the vulnerable woman, she entered into an illicit relationship with him, ironically buttressed by his ill-gotten money. Thereafter, while he lavished his attention on her, as if to add insult to the injury, he forced Raghu to run errands for her, and when she chided him for reducing his own son as a valet of his keep; 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 situation, 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, with the means at his disposal, won't he put their boy in some boarding school or the other? So she tried to locate him, more out of desperation than in hope, and managed to meet him, though

after a long haul, but 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 their wedlock. As he managed to light her old flame, in spite of his desertion, and with no love lost for her spouse; she had no qualms in sleeping with him, hoping to prop 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, she was a third rate slut. When she retorted, what if she told his wife about their connection, he warned her that she might as well forget about her future whatever little it might have held for her, for 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; not only her man callously retorted what proof he had of his own paternity but also rubbed salt on her son's paternal wound with the adage that while maternity was a fact, paternity was only a faith. Given Raghu's premature birth, he asserted that he never thought that he was indeed his father, and unable to bear the humiliation, her boy committed suicide on the railway tracks.

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 deciding to call a spade a spade, she sought divorce, to which, he was averse, as his sexual interest in her, by then, 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 she was all set to press for divorce regardless, tragedy struck her that fateful evening; as he tried to force her to 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 shelter, since her parents were dead and gone by then. But the next day, when a neighbor informed her on her mobile that Madhu and Mala died of poisoning and the police were on the lookout for her, she rushed to the Saifabad Police Station to clear her name, only to be locked-up by the Inspector as the main suspect. Oh, how he had abused her, she only knew, oh, what a diabolical character he was!

Though that cop failed to book the real culprit to date, she always had a hunch that Pravar, Mala's *awara* brother, would have been behind the murders, and so with a little detective work, she gathered that he became an object of ridicule because of his sibling's conduct and that all taunted him on that score. That could have been a motive for him to eliminate the illicit couple, but whatever it was, she was certain that the drink the couple drank to their death was poisoned by Pravar, who had a criminal background to boot, though not on the scale that the police tried to picture on the TV screens in the fake-notes case. While it all smelled fishy, the other day she chanced to see Dhruva's ad in an old issue of *Eenadu*, which prompted her to reach him.

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

Since Radha's version jelled with Shakeel'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 experience with her lover illustrate that even as love emanates from sexual union, in spite of it, lust remains barbarian.

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. Moreover, the way he used and abused a trusting woman indicates how despicable he was.

When he extended his hand to her in anticipation, as she held it a little longer, he recalled Ranjit's twenty-thousand dole against the promised half- a million bonanza.

Chapter 13

Backyard of Life

The next day, when Radha reported for work, Dhruva led her into his study to throw open his library of crime, as he put it that included the collections on Holmes, Mason et al for her to pore into, and as she was engrossed with the former, Raju went up to her to usher her to join his master at the dining table. But as she reached him with the lunchbox she brought along with her, Dhruva said that the perquisites included free lunches, and smiling coyly, she said that she won't mind working extra time if she could've free dinners as well.

While Radha came to spend long hours at 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva lost no time in initiating her to drinks with Gin and Sprite as he had his Old Monk with Thums UP. When he asked her if his smoking a cigar was any 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 well. So, as he lit his *lanke*, maintaining that she enjoyed its aroma, she wondered whether he could make rings out of its smoke, the way Pran does in the movies. So, as he exhibited his prowess at it, she wanted an encore, and he too goaded her to repeat her booze. While he was mixing 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 their properties, Pravar might have aimed at poisoning three of them with the same drink.

At length, what with Radha's seductive balm soothing his jilted wound, and her eagerness to come ever closer to him dissolving his resolve to be tightlipped, Dhruva appraised her how Pravar was fixed in the fake-notes case. When she said that maybe the dubious means justified the deserving end, he told her that Pravar had already confessed to the cop about his nefarious role in the double murder, though it was of no avail to book him for that. Saying that just the same 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 tackling the peculiar challenges Kavya's psychic aberrations the Stockholm Syndrome might pose in Pravar's case.

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. However, 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, and having had a hearty laugh at that, she said that what she meant was about the risk he ran in her nocturnal company. Meeting his flummoxed look with her lowered eyelids, she told him 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 advance, he told her that he was not the one to shy away from such a welcome prospect, and she coyly reminded him about the

proverbial camel that took over the tent when it was allowed only 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 enabled her onto the mahogany cot, she pulled him into her ardent embrace to anoint herself as the reigning queen of 9, Castle Hills.

Next morning, ushering in a new era in his life, as she served him bed-coffee; he caught her hand and said that she was hotter in his arms than the steamy thing in his hand. Turning coquettish, she said that she knew his ardor would keep her ever eager, and watched him joyously as he savored the strong coffee; when he took her into his ardent embrace, she entwined with him amorously.

After breakfast, with him in tow, she went to her Red Hills house to fetch her wardrobe as a prelude to let her transport herself into his life. So, feeling at home in his house on their return, and later seeing him eating her preparations greedily at lunch, she said coyly that she had some dessert to serve as well; while he played innocent, she pushed him all the way to Mithya's room that by then, she had already made her own.

Later, 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:

I'm glad that your child is taking shape up in my womb, and it's no blackmail. As I thought he would, my man came around. But if I were to be widowed when I still have it in me, you can count on my availability that is if you need me then, and God forbid, should fate orphan our offspring, I hope 9, Castle Hills' gates are ever open for it.

Love,

You know who.

Seeing the smudged defacement of the postal stamp on the envelope, he saw the irony of his only progeny being in anonymity, and secured the letter in the chest of drawers.

When Radha came to serve him some steamy tea, finding him morose, she said playfully that she was disappointed that even the newness of her charms 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. When he told her that Mithya had had a couple of miscarriages, as she wanted to know more about her life, he said that she would have that by and by. However, when she said in half-jest that as she waited for a peep into Mithya's past, what if he took her to the backyard of his life, so 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 in school, since none knew his surname, the headmaster lent the village name to it to make him Dhruva Devarakadra; but as he showed some 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, and despite the deprivation of parental love, he managed not to carry any emotional baggage. 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. However, thanks to the women who fancied him, he didn't miss much that way, to talk about which to a lady may not be chivalrous for a man; though all that changed when Mithya came into his life; but her untimely death brought him back to square one.

Saying she would strive to make good Mithya's irreparable loss, as she embraced him ardently, as if to draw comfort from it, he rested his head on her ample bosom.

Chapter 14

Cuckoo's Nest

Next day, when Raju announced Ranjit's arrival, Dhruva said jocularly that Radha might as well meet Mr. Interval, but she told him mischievously that it pays to retain his Ace of Hearts in case 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 his wife'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 her mother's life-size picture 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, she 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. When he was about to ring up Shakeel, she said jocularly that he should summon an ambulance as well for the cop might suffer a stroke by seeing her in his house; and patting her for her naughtiness, he said that he would ask the cop to come in an ambulance itself.

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 only through the proper channel. When Radha extended her hand to Shakeel saying that they better 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 and laid the blueprint to bring Radha and Natya together. Thereafter, ending up befriending her, the cop left them wondering how his premonition about her coming closer to the detective came true.

So, 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 an alleged shoplifting and packed her off to the lock-up of the 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. When Radha was about to ring up Dhruva asking him to speak to Shakeel, Natya pleaded with her to take up her case as well, and having been freed thereafter, Radha led Natya to her 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 not only solicited her about the need to reform Pravar for her own good but also convinced her about the need to keep him out of the loop as they together worked towards that end, and the latter swore that she would act as directed.

Chapter 15

'Untried' Crime

That day as 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 about to give 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 in a leather-bound book, leafing through which, she came across a story-like entry, *Untried Crime*, which read thus:

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 well-heeled man afforded her, she began planning a perfect murder of him and her paramour. So, leaving no loose ends for the cops to tie her up to the killings, she made discreet enquiries about the Inspector of the Saifabad Police Station, the one most likely to turn up for questioning her. What with his reputation as an Ace of Crime Detection increasing her sense of challenge, she spied upon him in a *burka*, and finding him manly and handsome, she fell for him. So, she kept track of him, and struck by his élan and enamored of his mien, she even turned covetous, which gave an erotic edge to her criminal cunning.

That night, after seeing the end of both her men and having anonymously alerted the police about the double murder, she expectantly waited for Dhruva to turn up at her bungalow, the gates of which she deliberately kept ajar, and when he knocked at the main 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 leading him into the drawing room.

"Do you know the whereabouts of your husband?" he asked looking into her eyes.

"Why, he's aboard the Godavari Express," she said affecting concern.

"Are you sure about that?"

"You know I'm his wife, don't you?"

"Can't there be secrets between the spouses?"

"Have you come to know of any mistress of his or what?" 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."

"In that case, can't you imagine the possibilities?" she said winking at him.

"It's no joke, he was possibly murdered," he said observing her demeanor.

"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?"

"Has he killed him?"

"Better answer my question."

"He's my errand boy, don't mind his age," she said smilingly.

"Is that all?"

"I know privacy is the first victim in crime investigation, don't I?" she said coquettishly.

"Don't mistake me, it's a routine question."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I am carrying on with him."

"But I don't think he's of your class."

"Why that should bother you at all?"

"Sorry but surely your man would've been concerned about that."

"You are spot on," she said taking his hand. "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?"

"I was with him till ten."

"Where it was?"

"Where Ashok was murdered that is going by your statement."

"You mean that you three were there."

"Are you implying a threesome or what?" she said laughingly.

"You know I am not privy to your sexual proclivities," he said not to be outplayed at his favorite game.

"Given a chance, I won't withhold any from you," she said not to be undone.

"You may keep that on hold and..."

"If 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," she said nonchalantly.

"Misplaced though, your confidence is admirable," he said unable to hide his admiration.

"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.

"So, I've lost my man and my paramour at once."

"What a double jeopardy it is, I'm really sorry."

"Why be sorry dear 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," she said squeezing his hand.

"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, it's at the Gandhi Hospital."

"Don't I see you're enamored," she said winking at him.

"I will wait for you there by ten in the morning," he said in embarrassment.

"Thank you for being a considerate cop," she said taking his hand all again.

"Maybe you could've revealed more," he said enjoying the touch.

"How unfair to say that without giving me scope?" she said feigning to be offended.

"You're impossible ma'am; good night."

"Sweet dreams," she said adjusting her lingerie to part-bare her boob.

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 had 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 is 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 either; so, 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 manner, 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. If anything, 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. But 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, he 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?' he began to analyze. 'Even if Ashok had extraordinary reflexes to push away Dilip upon being attacked, the latter's grip on the knife would have ensured that it was pulled out of his frame, which was not the case. So, as Dilip couldn't have died being pushed by Ashok for he died instantaneously after being stabbed; were it possible that Mithya murdered Dilip in cold blood after abetting him to stab Ashok to death? Was not the informer too an anonymous woman! Was it all Mithya's handiwork then?'

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

"What brings you here dear?" 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, 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 then?" she said moving closer.

"Thanks to your finger prints on the murder weapon, I have to lead you to the lock-up," he said dramatically taking her hand.

"What a discovery!" she said without taking her hand out of his. "Well, 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."

"Whither gone the third glass?" he said releasing her hand.

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

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

"Don't you see that scoring for me as it clearly indicates that they quarreled to death after drinking to the dregs," she said triumphantly.

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

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

"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.

"Why, 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 reviewed the case for possible loopholes, and finding none, he thought that he should play ball with her in her own court.

That evening when Dhruva reached 9, Castle Hills in *mufti*, 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 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 libidos, 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. Thereby, 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.

At length, lying in his arms in satisfaction, she opened her secretive 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 eliminate Ashok and I went along with it, not to acquire a rich widow tag, but to avoid the divorcee card. 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?" he said fondling her.

"Why not we together create history," she said invitingly. "It's my curiosity to measure up the cop who would turn up for my questioning 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. Whatever, in the wake of the murders, 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 wife. 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 - 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 I let you loose," he said contemplatively.

"Why not enslave me."

"That's resisting the irresistible."

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

"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 as yet," he said.

When he reached for his dress after she released him, she pulled out the tape recorder from his pocket.

"Let this be my keepsake of our first-time," she said dangling it before him.

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

However, after the dust has settled down, he led me into our marvelous wedlock.

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.

Chapter 16

Kavya's Quagmire

When Radha took Dhruva to cloud nine, as if to bring him back to the mundane setting, Dicey got seriously indisposed; though he was 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 could cover a lot of Pravar's ground into which Kavya had ventured deep that she mapped for Dhruva over drinks one evening.

After securing his bail, Kavya was wont to spend long hours with Pravar to work out their defense strategy. In that process, even as he was charmed by her suaveness, she was discomfited by his outrageous manner, yet she put up with him so as to atone herself for Ranjit's foul on him. However, she readily struck a chord with Natya, who was all empathy for her, for her sympathy for them, but her proximity 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 misplaced samaritanism blinding her vision, Kavya mistook his advances as manifestations of his exaggerated gratitude for her, and Natya, though quick to sense his ill-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, in time, he pressed her to pander to his whim by bringing around 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'. So, reckoning that he would get over his obsession for her rival only in her possession, willy-nilly, Natya became his accomplice to trick Kavya into his bed.

Thereafter, as per the script, 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 for him. So, distressed at the development and embarrassed to the core, Kavya was at a loss as 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? However, to overcome her predicament, she thought of putting sense into his deranged head that it was not proper to covet a woman old enough to be his elder sister. Though 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 yield to his raging passion that was killing him any way.

Thereby, Kavya saw no way out to save her honor but by cold-shouldering him, hoping that he would get over his obsession for her in time, and so kept away from him, but soon as 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, that would fail her mission. What with her obsession for justice coupled with her empathy for him tilting the scales, she could hold no more, and as he began to overwhelm her with his youthful urges, she felt as if her life was under siege in their liaison. Soon, as Pravar tended to ignore Natya, she 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 her man to make it a *ménage a trois* for them.

As that's how things stood as per Natya's brief, Dhruva blamed himself for Kavya's fall, and Radha felt the only way to rescue her was to nab Pravar, he said that he would talk to Shakeel to handle him. So, as he reached for his mobile, he received a call from him, by then shifted to the Jubilee Hills Police Station.

The cop said that around six in the evening, he received a call from Kavya, informing him that Ranjit lay dead at home; so he rushed to *Spandan* to take stock of the situation. He learned from her 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. However, he saw nothing amiss in the house and there were no injuries on the body, all of which pointed out to a possible heart attack, but yet he moved the body for post-mortem, and sounded his informers to pick up in the grapevine.

While Dhruva became pensive, Radha said that she knew for long that it was in the coming; after all, didn't Natya tell her that Pravar was hell-bent to have Kavya all for himself? Surely, adept at the art of poisoning, he would have done in Ranjit to gain Kavya's undivided affections. However, Dhruva told her not to jump the gun; for all he knew, he could have as well committed suicide, unable to bear the ignominy of being a cuckold or for that matter, he might have died even 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 by all indications Ranjit's death was owing to poisoning and that Kavya got an anticipatory bail for herself making him wonder whether she had a hand in the sordid affair. Then Dhruva told him 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 become the prime suspect in the case that too given that she had a paramour to boot. But 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 seen visiting Ranjit, which made Dhruva say whether it was a woman in *burka* or women in *burka*. At that the cop 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. When Radha interjected by saying, what if the woman in *burka* was Natya, Pravar's red herring, to mislead the police; Shakeel said that it was not a bad line of investigation. However, Dhruva cautioned him 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.

At that Shakeel said that the foolhardiness of the criminal impulse always puzzled him but Dhruva reasoned that even as the calling of crime clouds reason, its execution itself impairs caution, imperiling the cover up. As for the victims of crime, he said, 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? Or can any explain the stupidity of a philanderer who walks into his death trap laid by the man he has been cuckolding? How such dig their own graves!

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

Chapter 17

Murders to Mislead

Next morning, after Radha had gone out 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 as he was immobilized at the threshold, struck by his enamored demeanor, she stuck to her seat; but 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 at her to be seated, she reposted herself confusedly. Though he readily sensed the import of her visit and the possibilities it portended, yet he acquired a questioning look, and pulling out his call letter from her handbag, she held it out to him.

Perusing it as a ruse to hide his excitement, when he told her in the end that they could begin the interview, she said that the purpose of her visit was to seek his assistance but not to offer her services. While he feigned surprise at that, outlining the circumstances that brought her to him, she sought his help in unraveling the mystery of

her husband's death. When he wanted to know if she had any suspect in mind, she said that if it were the case, 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 said she banked on her gut feeling that he could outwit the killer.

Seeing his inclination, when she offered to take him to her place in her car, reckoning that with her at the wheel, he would be able to assess her better, he went with her idea, and on their drive to *Spandan*, watching her closely all the way, he came to the view that her visage suggested that she could be innocent. As if reading his thoughts, she asked him if he really believed that she was not involved in her husband's murder as the cops thought she was. Pleased with her forthrightness, 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. Satisfied with his approach but yet wanting to test his mettle, she asked him if he cared to tell her about any intriguing murder that he might have solved. Sensing her intention, he said that her query made him recall a case in cracking which, Mithya, his late wife, played a prominent role. But as 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, she 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 prorogue to his narrative, he asked her if she could recall the serial killings of some middle-aged women in the Langar Hauz area that shook the Hyderabadis five years back. Nodding her head in the right direction, she said that she was aware of the intriguing murders but there was no news about it later.

Mithya viewed those mysterious murders from the kaleidoscope of liaisons; he began to recap; so she rented a portion in the Langar Hauz as an estranged wife and gathered the details of the cheating husbands and wives through the grapevine. But as he was disinclined to pursue that investigative course for the list didn't carry the nerves of a killer, shifting her gossiping gear to reach the abused women, she came to know about the peculiar relationship between Ramya a young woman and Haritha, her middle-aged step-mother owing to the unusual will and testament that bound them.

Shortly before his death that was twenty years back, Ramya's father bequeathed his entire property to her, five-years then, and made Haritha, his childless second wife, her guardian. Besides adding insult to his wife's injury, he stated in his will that if his widowed was to wed again, she would cease to be his daughter's guardian, and all that goes with it. Further venting his apathy towards his young wife, he willed that as and when his daughter becomes a mother, his widow would be only entitled to a meager pension, and should his daughter die barren, then the orphanage he named gets it all. Finally, as if to protect his progeny from his wife's presumed ill-will, he willed that if his daughter and her heirs were to die before his wife's death, for whatever reason, all his assets would then go the said orphanage. Well, as that Will underscored mistrust and spelled malice, Mithya cultivated the young Ramya, who in a moment of weakness made her privy to the untenable arrangement her father's will ushered in her life.

Widowed, at barely thirty and seeing the death-knell of a will, Haritha was seethed with a hapless rage, but in time, applying her mind to browbeat the imposition, she thought of an ingenious solution to bypass its nefarious proposition. Accordingly, she convinced Ramya, six then, about the need of a male in the house for their protection, and got her married to the sixteen-year old Rahul, however, with an eye on him. However, having come of age, when Ramya, realized that her man was her stepmother's lover, Haritha sought to palliate her by letting Rahul consummate their marriage. But soon, turning eager to have her husband all for herself, Ramya tried to

wean him away from her stepmother's grip, though unsuccessfully, but once her youth blossomed into womanhood that coincided with the oldie's weaning charms, Rahul started leaning towards his wife. At that, a peeved Haritha began throwing tantrums at them to rob their newfound marital bliss, which drove Rahul into his wife's exclusive fold. Thus thrown out of the unethical love triangle that left in the lurch, the embittered woman turned even more cynical and began to menace the young couple at every turn.

So Mithya thought that the random killings in the neighborhood could have been their prelude to target their nemesis under their shadow, and to get to the bottom of it, as she worked on Ramya's presumed guilt. So, at length, Ramya confided in her that Rahul had reckoned that if they randomly kill a couple or more of the middle-aged women to start with, unless caught in the act, for the lack of any motive, none would ever suspect their involvement in those murders, and in time, if they hit their real target, under the smokescreen of those murders, the police would treat that as yet another of the same serial. Thus, having laid the path for Haritha's last journey, when they were all set to strike at her, she was struck with the terminal cancer, thereby rendering the youngsters remorseful of killing those innocents, so, in a way, even after her cancerous death, Haritha continued to torment them.

Saying in conclusion that as Mithya felt that the couple, having been the victims of subterfuge, deserved a fresh lease of life, he had agreed to put a lid on the case that his department anyway closed as unsolved, and when he wanted to know how she felt about it all, she said that she was at a loss to form an opinion. But as he averred that the discretion to arraign an errant or not, lent charm of being a private detective, she told him that she hoped that he would not abuse his prerogative in the case on hand.

Chapter 18

The Other Woman

When they reached *Spandan*, while he recalled his earlier visit there, she led him in to give a free rein to scan her dwelling, but as he entered the master bedroom, unable to take his eyes off from the wedding photograph on the wall, he said that she looked divine in her bridal attire. Then, as she flung herself onto the bed while sobbing, he apologized for his indiscretion, and affected by his empathy, she 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 just the same, she remained faithful to him until Pravar came into her orderly life to lead her astray. It all began in the wake of her kidnapping when she started pitting the mean core of her partner's soft manner against the sublime inner of her captor's savage nature. So, when the inspector foisted the fake-notes case on the hapless boy, 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 after his suicide attempts, she shamefully yielded to him to save his life. Oh, how her life began pushing her to the precipice of vice thereafter she only knew, but surely her husband could have got wind of her affair, and to spite her, he might have got into a liaison with some woman, strangely to his own undoing, which, besides adding to her guilt, has made her even more vulnerable than ever.

At that, overwhelmed by empathy for her, he made her privy to the psychics of the 'Stockholm Syndrome', and helped her grasp the aberrations that led her into that messy affair. So, shocked and relieved in the same vein after seeing her dark past in a fresh light, she involuntarily clutched at his hand. Then holding her hand, he said how come her husband, whom he had apprised about it, failed to share the same with her, and surprised at that, she asked him when it was, but realizing his slip and wanting to

avoid any premature disclosure; he said that it was when he came to seek his counseling on account of her disturbing affair. After pondering for a while, when she sought his psychiatric help to put her odd past behind her, he assured her that he would help her to bring her life back to normality. Thanking him, as she said that she would count on him, moved by her faith in him, he said that he would never let her down, and gratified no end; she said that she believed she met the right man at long last. At that, as if to augment her belief, he hugged her tentatively, and asked her, given Pravar's motive for the gainful murder, what she thought about his possible role in her husband's death, she said that he had an alibi in her. But when he said what if Pravar had induced Natya, or involved some other woman, to do the job for him; looking at him adoringly, she said mischievously that it was for him to probe the matter and nab the murderess.

When he wanted to know who was the other woman in her husband's life, she said that though she knew that, of late in her absence, he was receiving some woman at home, who took care not to leave any clues about her secret visits; but the neighbors had told her that she always came in a *burka*. However, from the smell of the things in the house, she was certain that woman was with him before he was poisoned. When he asked her why she didn't catch her man red-handed with her, bowing her head, she said that she thought she had no moral right to do so. Then he took her hand, as if to convey his admiration for her sensitivity and she clasped it as though to convey her gratitude for his understanding.

In time, as he got up to leave, she offered to drive him home, but he said that though that would enable him more of her company, yet he wouldn't want her to drive an extra meter in Hyderabad's maddening traffic. Thanking him for his consideration and seeing him off at the gate and mulling over his gestures of interest and his words of concern for her, she espied him as he walked down the lane as if in reluctance. What with her self-worth getting a boost with his enamored attentions, she craved to have more of the same, and soon, as he looked back at her, pleased with herself, she waved at him all the way.

Hiring an auto and reaching home in Kavya's thoughts, while briefing Radha about his visit to *Spandan*, he discerned a perceptible change of color in her demeanor, which he attributed to the human proclivity for sexual insecurity. So, when she sought to probe his mind, he put the ball in her court with her 'Pravar might have used Natya to poison Ranjit' theory, but she said that on second thoughts, she was more inclined to view that as the handiwork of Pravar-Kavya combine for they had a shared motive as well as the common means to commit the crime. Wanting to have something concrete rather than her conjecture, as he said that they better waited for Shakeel's report about Ranjit's past, she asked him to caution the cop for he could be high on Pravar's hit-list, and added that Kavya can be expected to aid and abet the brat for she too bore a grudge against him.

What with Radha bringing him back to square one, Dhruva wondered whether Kavya's confession was but a red herring, but reckoning that when the ill motives of the natural suspects to commit a crime are an open secret, someone with a hidden agenda might be tempted to use that as a camouflage for his subterfuge, he saw the need to enlarge the scope of the investigation well beyond the apparent suspects.

Chapter 19

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 switched it off readily, and moving out of the bedroom, he realized that the call was from Shakeel's cell. When he returned the call, as he was

kept on hold for long, he dialed the residential number and found that too was ever engaged; however, soon, ending the stalemate, Shakeel's son got him on the mobile. Shocked at learning that the cop had died in his sleep, he was dumbfounded, and recovering, he wondered whether he too went the Ranjit's way. Then, recalling Radha's fears for Shakeel's life, he looked at her instinctively, and finding her in a serene sleep, as he set out to visit the bereaved, he told Raju to inform her about the tragedy as she woke up.

When he reached Shakeel's house in Chatrinaka, he had to wade through the milling crowd to make it to the corpse, not only to pay his respects to the departed soul but also to unearth the clues, if any, to his death, even as it transpired that it was business as usual for the deceased on the day of his demise. Even though all thought that he could have died of a stroke and he found nothing incriminating, yet insisting upon a post-mortem and having assured to stand by the family through thick and thin, the detective left them.

However, on reaching home, when he aired his apprehensions about the death, as Radha voiced her suspicions about Pravar's possible involvement in it, he wondered what if he targets Kavya next, piqued at her possible indifference towards him. If he indeed had seen Ranjit's end to own her, would he pardon her for ditching him? Had he avenged himself on Shakeel for his foisting a false case on him, would he go soft on his lady-love for being hard on him? Isn't sexual hurt a compelling impulse to commit crime, and hadn't the cop sketched him as cunning and ruthless; but still, why place the cart before the horse; let the post-mortem report arrive, so averred the detective to her.

The next evening, when Dhruva reached the Chatrinaka Police Station, as he was given to understand that the as the forensic tests confirmed that Shakeel's death too was owing to poisoning, he was truly worried about Kavya's safety, and so as to have a word with her, he readily drove down to her *Spandan*.

Though she received him warmly, feeling embarrassed by his enamored look, she instinctively became tentative, but when he managed to camouflage his ardor, she impulsively regained her poise, and revealed that probing Shakeel's death, just then the police came to inquire about her whereabouts the other day. So, when he wanted to have her take on the probability of Pravar avenging himself on the cop, she said that, on and off, he was wont to rage for revenge, when she used to urge him to desist from such thoughts. However, after her husband'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 association with him, she was firm not to yield to him anymore, come what may. So, who knew, he could have killed the cop hoping that she would reach up to him to renew her counseling, so be it, but there was no way she would succumb to him ever again.

At that, while he espied her with empathy, saying that she felt miserable carrying the cross of her weird past, as she broke down, he told her as that brat was not worthy of her thoughts, it made no sense for her in suffering on his account. Then, as she looked at him with hope, he unraveled Pravar's criminal background, as etched by Radha and sketched by Shakeel, which prompted her to say that she felt even more wretched for having carried on with such a character. Moved by the radiance of her visage in her repentance, as he was impelled to take her into his arms as if to feel her soul, driven by her sense of emptiness, she insensibly sank into his chest as though for her solace. However, when he reiterated the need for her to let bygones be bygones for the sake of her future, she confessed to him in remorse that she reduced herself to be his accomplice in crime as well. Though he said that was quite understandable, 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 that brat.

By the time he kidnapped her, he was a rank broke, having splurged all the booty, acquired through a boy's kidnap, for Natya's endearment, and what with that farce of a ransom in her case having ended in the confiscation of the stolen cars as well, he had nothing left to fall back upon. So, she was constrained to provide succor and support to the hapless couple but while he was initially content with living on her doles, however, after he won her over, he came to seek more and more from her, but her man, as if on cue, curtailed her access to the family purse, and that forced her to play ball with him at extortions. Why, it was her cynical idea that with right tactics, he could make the corrupt to cough up part of their ill-gotten money, with none of them going to town about it for fear of further trouble. At that, he proposed that they might conduct fake tax raids with forged identities, but she reckoned that, sooner than later, it would only land him in one gaol or the other as someone at some stage was bound to call his bluff. So, when he said what to make out of her non-starter of an idea, she told him that with her brains and his brawn, they could yet make it workable; what with her contacts in the department, she would be able to prepare the profiles of the high-end tax evaders for him to pick up the faint-hearted from amongst them. But 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 at bay, it might as well be a smooth sailing for him.

Then, benumbed by shame, she paused for a while, but as if driven by his empathy, she resumed, saying that her plan did work to her peculiar excitement, which made her realize that her heart after all had a criminal beat in it. When he gently pressed her shoulder, as if to convey his understanding of the human frailties, she said that she abhorred the darker side of her nature; and even as he reached out for her hand, she ran inside in despair, and he stayed back to let her overcome her remorse in solitude.

However, smelling some gas and rushing into the kitchen, as he saw her picking up the gas-lighter, he grabbed it from her and closed the cylinder valve, after which, crying inconsolably, she sank into his arms, but as he led her to the verandah for fresh air, she withdrew from him in self-remorse.

Shortly thereafter, having led her back into the drawing room, even as he was at a loss to understand as to how to calm her, she told him that she could not bear the very thought of leading life with a foul soul in a polluted body. Taken aback at her self-remorse, he pleaded with her not to feel so low, and told her that it was only a matter of time before she regained her self-worth; and as if to demonstrate his belief in his prophesy, he was impelled to embrace her to inject hope in her through his ardent kissing, and as though she had already realized her mettle, she soon lent passion to her tongue to deep kiss him for long. However, when she withdrew her lips and presented her sparkling eyes to him as if to enable him espy her rejuvenated self, elated at that, he enlaced her ardently as though to cherish her rejuvenated persona.

However, as though to carry forward the moment, when he proposed that she may put up in his house, where with the Rajus in attendance, she would have Radha, his companion, for company, thanking him profusely, as she hesitated to go with him, as if to show her the way, he took her hand, and cajoled by him, she packed up some essentials.

Thus, when Kavya stepped into 9, Castle Hills, seeing her body language, Radha realized that she had a formidable rival to contend with, and reckoned that it might not help her cause if she were to cut up with him on her score. However, while reviewing Shakeel's demise with her, when Dhruva wondered whether it had any connection with Ranjith's death, she asserted that she could see Kavya's extended hand in both the murders. But before she could elaborate upon that, he received a call informing him that the day he died, Shakeel was seen with a woman in *burka*, and as he shared that news with her, she said that it too could have been a case of Pravar's poison at work

under Kavya's *burka*; why, she had Natya's word that having reduced herself as his vassal, she became his partner in crime no less.

Then, warning her not to jump to hasty conclusions, he told her it was not wise to go by Natya's words alone for she could have grouses against her rival to her man's affections, and added that she should've learned about that from her own experience; wasn't it Shakeel's over-reliance on Pravar's account that caused her so much grief; so why repeat the mistake to Kavya's hurt as well? However, she reminded him how Kavya had given a clean chit to her paramour in her husband's murder, and added that it was for him to decide whether she faked that suicide attempt, *a la Pravar*, to gain his sympathy, or if she was only feigning remorse over their liaison just to evade his investigative radar.

But as he maintained that his gut feeling was that Kavya was innocent, and her change of heart was genuine, she said, half in jest, that his fondness for attractive women tended to fudge his judgment about them. However, 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 far better for her if he kept his eyes off the charming guest. Then, as he came up with a repartee that her own allure had already blinded him, she retorted by saying that what if her rival uses her rare sex appeal as a laser to restore his vision.

Chapter 20

A Perfect Murder

Soon, Dhruva had noticed that while Radha seemed to have reconciled to his affection for Kavya, for her part, Kavya, having taken to Radha's peculiar charm, even became enamored of her.

So, guided by Dhruva's counseling and buttressed by Radha's camaraderie, as Kavya recouped from her trauma sooner than expected, she thought it fit to go back to *Spandan*. However, Dhruva maintained that he was not so naïve as to put his client's life at risk; and Radha too chipped in by saying that until the venom behind the poison was identified, it was as well that Kavya stayed away from her place. But when 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 culprits. Bemused by their bonhomie, as he told Kavya that in the normal course, she would have been senior to Radha; she said that she bore no grudge against her mate on that score.

Meaning business, as he wanted Kavya to start gathering Ranjit's past, she said for that she would have a lot of ground to cover, as her in-laws were ever on the move that is until they died two years back. While he felt that probing his immediate past might save much of that bother, for the impulse of a recent hurt would've a stronger urge for revenge, she said that she has a hunch that his premarital life might hold the key to his undoing, and thus it was as well that she delved deep into his distant past. What with Dhruva seeing merit in her supposition, Kavya left them in search of her husband's past, where he happened to stay, when they got married.

Soon thereafter, Radha said to Dhruva that Natya told her that she feared for the worst as Pravar was mad at the loss of his lady-love, and added as that the poor girl bore the brunt of his frustration, her vengeful man can be expected to avenge himself on Kavya sooner than later. What was worse, Radha averred that he might force the hapless lass to be an accomplice in the crime, and lamented at her fate that first let her fall into Rajan's criminal hands only to lead her into Pravar's vicious grip; and if only she could help her get out of the rut and put her on track under his care.

At that, recalling the empathy that girl had induced in him that evening on the Tank Bund, as Dhruva told her that he would strive to end the Pravar menace. Radha said that she would love to see him effect a course correction in Natya's deranged life, even as he brought Kavya's derailed life back on the tracks. But he said that given that Ranjit's killer was still at large, and as Kavya's life too could be imperiled, she may have to wait a while for him to shift his focus onto Pravar and meanwhile she should apply her mind as to how to nab him.

However, when she wanted to know whether Ranjit's murder could be a perfect murder, he said that he was not sure about that yet, but to her poser about 'what is a perfect murder', he theorized that even when backed by the circumstantial evidence, if an irrefutable motive and an inalienable gain from the crime fail to nail the suspect, then it's a perfect murder. Then as she wondered aloud whether such was in the realms of possibility at all, he detailed the immaculate plan and its meticulous execution of a murder that he reckoned as conceptually perfect

That was when he was the Station House Officer of the Saifabad Police Station; one morning, a young and beautiful woman, introducing herself as Neha, lodged a missing person complaint as Murali, her husband, failed to return home the previous night, and said that she feared something untoward could have happened with him. When he asked her whether she could think of anyone who could be inimical to him, she said sobbingly that he was his worst enemy, and after some persuasion, she narrated her tale - burdened by debts, ever since her husband wound up his automobile business, he became a cynic that is besides being an alcoholic; somehow, he convinced himself that a poor man's spouse was rich men's prey. 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, she couldn't die, but rattled by that, he became remorseful and started talking in terms of ending his own life; and it was his psychological imbalance and the hazards of drunken driving that came to plague her. When he asked for Murali's photograph, she handed him one.

But the next day, she came to inform him that her husband had returned only to remain more depressed than ever before, and even though she urged him to take it easy, he was still harping on his past; what's worse he says that he had no right to live. So, moved by her predicament, as Dhruva sounded sympathetic, she thanked him for his empathy, and said that she would try to persuade him to consult a psychiatrist. Believing that that she deserved better and thinking that if only he met her as a miss, he wished her well and bade her good bye.

However, shortly thereafter, one evening in the police club, he heard a colleague say that only recently, at a desolate level crossing, not far off from Hyderabad, a man's body was retrieved from his car, accidentally crushed on the railway tracks, so much for the railway safety! Moreover, as the graphologist confirmed that the writing in the suicide note found in the victim's wallet matched his handwriting, and as the post-mortem report too indicated a drunken death, the case was closed as there was no reason to proceed further.

But as crime would have it, it readily occurred to him, what if Neha's missing person complaint then was but a red herring, so he thought it fit to delve into her life and times, and as he gathered in the grapevine that Murali, suspecting her fidelity, was wont to ill-treat her, he could smell the rat. So, out of professional curiosity, he unofficially involved himself in the case, and upon closer scrutiny of the suicide note it became apparent to him that it was an odd tear-out from a foolscap paper and its tone and tenor suggested that possibly it could be a part of some story penned by the deceased. However, such a possibility amused him for muse or no muse, these days; all are at

writing fiction, which, besides inundating the world of letters, made it difficult for the readers to separate the literary grain from the wordy chaff.

Whatever, were it not possible that Neha, having laid her hands on a manuscript containing that suicide thing, possibly returned by some magazine house, prepared the script for her husband's end with it; so he went round the publishing houses, in one of which, an assistant editor readily recalled the queer story with that suicide pitch, the manuscript of which was returned to the sender only recently. With the needle of suspicion so firmly tilted towards her murderous hand, he confronted her with that damned evidence.

Owning up her guilt, a teary-eyed Neha told him how it all started – since long, her husband began treating her merely as a sexual bowl, that too when he could not get hold of some whore or the other, and adding insult to injury, whenever he laid her, he made it a point to make that clear to her. How mean men can become to demean women, she lamented, and slighted thus, she seduced Mohan, his close friend, for sex as well as self-esteem. However, as her man got wind of their affair, he calibrated his responses cunningly; on one hand he started sponging on Mohan at the pain of breaking up with him, and on the other, he began scheming to ruin his marriage by estranging his wife from him. So, not wanting to be the cause of Mohan's marital ruin, she alerted him to Murali's designs; she even offered to end their affair; but afraid of Murali's potential for mischief, Mohan thought of silencing him by a *supari*, but fearing that the foolhardy of a third party could spell trouble for both of them, she chartered the course of that murder, as by then she had that fatal manuscript in her hand.

So, on that fateful day, she induced her man to drink to the hilt, and when he pissed out, for an alibi, she joined Mohan waiting at the Odeon, which they left as soon as the movie began. Thereby reaching home on the sly, she got her husband into her car for him to have fresh air at the city's outskirts, so she made it to the earmarked place with him in their car, while Mohan followed in his vehicle. There, steering her car onto the desolate railway tracks, and making Murali sit in the driving seat and sitting beside him to ensure that he stayed put, she awaited the scheduled train to speed in, and upon citing it, got down from it to witness the good riddance of their bad rubbish. Soon, when it was all over for Murali, as Mohan drove in from a nearby hiding place, proud of that perfect murder, they drove back to the city to begin life afresh as man and his secret wife.

While Radha wondered how Neha's concern for her paramour's wife motivated her to murder her own man, Dhruva saw it merely as Mohan's means to ward off his ill-will and Neha's escape route from his cruel ways. Besides, isn't the nature of the species to devour others for the sake of self-preservation? So he buried the murder in the coffin of suicide. Admiring his empathy for the 'preys on the prowl', she sank into his arms saying that it would appear as if without some divine hand to guide it, there could never be a perfect murder, and added that should things mundane ever make it imperfect, maybe, the culprit could still count on him.

Chapter 21

Deaths in Spandan

That morning, when Kavya returned to Dhruva's 'think of the devil' welcome and Radha's 'what's the news' query, Raju greeted her with a cup of hot filter coffee.

However, 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, like it's not wise to mix drinks, it's imprudent to mix their leads. What with her enthusiasm reined in

thus, as Radha kept mum, he led Kavya into the sprawling lawns to have a first-hand account of her fact-findings.

Kavya told him that her guesswork at Guntur took her to an old woman, who, having recognized Ranjit from his old photographs she carried, recalled that years back; he lived with his young wife nearby. Leave alone him, even she didn't mix with any, save Shyamala, an aunt of her childhood mate Rani; so all suspected that, having eloped, they were covering their tracks. But soon, as he vanished, leaving her in the lurch, the entire neighborhood was agog with 'I told you so', and when she too left shortly thereafter, no one knows where, the grapevine only grew with more rumors. Anyway, that was so long ago, and she was not sure whether even Shyamala knew more about that girl's elopement that went awry. However, when Kavya wanted to contact Shyamala, the old woman said that she had been to the U.S to help her daughter deliver, and thanks to the six-month cap, she could be back home anytime.

Capping her trip, Kavya informed him, though she gave his c/o address to that woman to write to her on Shyamala's return, maybe, she need to go there after some time to catch up with her. When he wanted to know about the reverse queries from the oldie, she told him smilingly that luckily, she was more of a transmitter than a receiver, as otherwise it would have been well nigh impossible for her to make any headway.

Thereafter, leaving the women to their ways, and reaching his study, he recalled Radha's intriguing description of her childhood friend as 'full-soul mate and half-namesake', and thought what if Shyamala's niece turns out to be her long lost friend; won't it mean that Ranjit's deserted wife was none other than she herself. If so, what an irony it would be that unknowingly, Kavya had stumbled upon her husband's long shadow over the very woman rivaling her for his affections! But yet, out of consideration for her rival's position in his life, she subdues her emotions for him generated in that burst of their passion; why, was he any less constrained in reining in his raging desire as it's inappropriate to woo a widow in her mourning. Yet, when the time is ripe to court her, as it can never be a case of either/ or of these fascinating women, there's no other way for him but ménage a trios with them.

That evening, when Radha proposed that the apprentice should celebrate her maiden foray with three cheers over drinks and as Kavya said that she was a game for it, Dhruva said in half jest that the senior might rue her move for the junior may outwit her. Then, mixing drink for them, as Radha said in jest that it may pay to keep the other woman high, especially when the stakes were high, Kavya retorted smilingly that she would oblige her to make good her lost time. Thus, after a couple of drinks, as if to make good her promise, a tipsy Kavya wanted to have a third binge, but even though he was against it, yet as she insisted for a large, Radha broke the deadlock by mixing a small one for her. So, when Raju came to announce dinner for them, Radha said bottoms up, Dhruva stubbed his cigar, and Kavya sipped the last dreg.

Towards the evening the next day, when the threesome were playing rummy, Raju said that Inspector Simon, who replaced Shakeel at the Jubilee Hills Police Station, came to see him. By then having learned that the newcomer was advised by all to avoid him as Shakeel had bungled up the fake-notes case at his behest, Dhruva sensed that his was no friendly visit. So, stepping into the anteroom tentatively and having greeted the visitor warmly, he enquired in jest whether he came to the Castle Hills for sightseeing; but when the cop said, rather tersely, that he was there to question Kavya about the mysterious deaths in her *Spandan*, Dhruva knew it was no joking time.

Evan as Dhruva led him into the study, Simon said that informed about foul smell in her house, they broke open its main door in the morning and found therein the decomposed bodies of a young couple. With no traces of any bodily injuries or any signs

of forcible entry into the premises, prima facie, it appeared that they might have died in a suicide pact. But when he was told that the dead were not the inmates, and it was only recently that the house owner died mysteriously, he decided to personally investigate the matter. As if it's not puzzle enough that the house was found locked from inside even as the housewife was not residing in it for quite a while, the assertion of a *chowkidar* in the locality that he had seen a *burka*-clad woman enter the house four days back made the case all the more intriguing. Since the neighbors were unaware of the housewife's whereabouts, he enquired at the Jubilee Hills Post Office and came to know that her letters were being redirected to 9, Castle Hills, which should explain his rather unwelcome visit.

When Dhruva broke the shattering news, shocked beyond belief, Kavya wanted to go to *Spandan* to see it all for herself, but Simon said that first she should try to identify the dead at the Gandhi Hospital. So, led by Simon, and accompanied by Dhruva and Radha, she made it to the hospital, where in its mortuary; she could identify the dead as Pravar and Natya. However, while Simon was recording Kavya's statement, Radha wanted Dhruva to have a last look at Natya, but preferring to retain her *pallu*-covered face for a memory, he desisted from seeing her decomposed body. Soon, let off after her assurance to cooperate in the investigation, a perplexed Kavya was led out of the police station by Dhruva and Radha.

Upon reaching home, saying that she was too dazed to comprehend the situation as Kavya rushed into her room; left alone with Radha, as Dhruva, reviewed the stunning development with her; she told him that there were questions for Kavya to answer after all. Given that she only had the house key, if not Kavya in *burka*, who could have led the ill-starred couple into her house? Besides, who would benefit the most with their end than her? After all, was she not craving to begin life afresh, and was it possible with them around her? Moreover, Natya had vouchsafed that Kavya had a cunning mind with criminal impulses; maybe her going to Guntur was a means to acquire an alibi.

As if to free himself from Radha's brainwash, Dhruva rushed to the Jubilee Hills Police Station to confabulate with Simon, who said that prima facie Kavya remained the sole suspect and revealed that he had also asked his men to review the dossier on her husband's murder to bring her under the scanner. Then Dhruva assured him that even though she was his client, if he ever scented her criminal hand behind the murders, he didn't intend to hold her brief for sure. When Simon said that he hoped he would not hinder his investigation as well, assuring him of his bona fide, Dhruva said that he better took him to the *Spandan* for a second opinion in cracking the case.

On their way, Simon said that as there were no signs of the deceased having moved about in the house, it can be said that they could have died shortly after they got in, at which Dhruva wanted to know whether the door key was found in the house. Then the cop said that it was not traced in spite of a thorough search, for after snaring them in, Kavya could have left with it on the sly. Moreover, as the Godrej lock was any way self-locking, the deceased, known to her any way, wouldn't have bothered much, even if she had told them that she wanted to take away the key with her for whatever reason. Besides, it was apparent that the kitchen was in disuse for quite a while and the remnants of the packed food found in the dustbin would clearly imply that the couple were there hardly for a day at the most before they met their end.

When they reached the *Spandan*, as the guard on duty opened the main door for them, Simon said that, as the police had to force open the door, the Godrej lock in situ was damaged, which he had substituted any way. However, as they got into the house, closing the main door behind them, the detective noticed that it was shorn of its door bolt, so he asked the cop whether he had seen it in its position when they first came in. When the cop confirmed that there was none even then, detective had drawn his

attention to the telltale marks of its having been in place until very recently; and then, having scanned the damaged Godrej lock with his magnifying glass, he turned his attention to the drawing room and done with it, he got into the guest room, where a *burka* was laid on the clothesline.

Having picked up the garment, and finding neither tailor's label nor dhobi mark on it, the detective had noted its measurements with a tape that he had brought along, at which, as the cop said there were some more of such in the attached toilet of the master bedroom; seeing that *burkas* could hold the key to the murders, he tallied them all with the one found in the guestroom. When Dhruva turned his attention to the empty wardrobe in the master bedroom, Simon said that as they failed to trace the keys in the house; they broke it open, but found nothing worthwhile therein. However, when asked by Dhruva 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; at that, the detective suggested that he should also record the fact of the missing main door bolt that's beside sending the original Godrej lock for forensic examination.

Then, as Dhruva began scanning the ground around the guest room window, when Simon said that it was not a case of forcible entry through it; the detective told him that he was in fact looking for signs of an easy passage from there to the main door.

Shortly thereafter, when Dhruva said that he had nothing more to look for there, Simon led him back to the police station, where they spent some investigative time together.

Chapter 22

Arraigned in Remand

That evening, closeting with a nonplussed Kavya, when Dhruva asked her about her house keys, telling him that after her husband's death, she got the old Godrej lock replaced with a new one, she pulled out one from her purse, and informed him that she kept the other two with a bunch of cupboard keys in her bank locker along with her jewelry. Then when he asked her what for she got the main door bolt removed while replacing the door lock, apparently surprised, she said that it was very much intact even as he led her out of her house to bring her into his that day. Finally, he asked her what made her to leave her *burkas* on the clothes-line in the master bathroom, she swore that she never wore a *burka* all her life, and wondered what it was all about. At that, holding her in his reassuring arms, he detailed his findings at *Spandan* that pointed towards a conspiracy against her, and said that still there was no need for her to lose sleep about that. However, at length, taking hold of that Godrej key for his safekeeping, he bade Kavya good night with sweet dreams.

The next morning, as she volunteered to show him the other keys, as Dhruva drove her to the Andhra Bank in the Jubilee Hills, greeting her warmly; the manger wondered why she became so scarce of late. When she told him the purpose of her visit, he helped her complete the formalities, and after that, she led Dhruva to her locker, from which she retrieved two Godrej keys with a bunch of other keys that she entrusted to him,

Thus having left the bank, as they got into the car, though she looked at him in hope, he said that if the post-mortem report were to come up with some foul play, she can count on Simon to arrest her and press for her custodial interrogation. When she lamented how her past came to haunt her, folding her in his arms, as if in protection, he said that she better obtained an anticipatory bail, before he could bail her out of her predicament. However, she said that she better subjected herself to the due process of

law to come clean for she was confident of defending herself in the court. Then, in all admiration, pressing her more closely to him, he assured her that he would get to the bottom of the crime for truth to prevail. However, updating all the murders so to help her fashion her arguments to avoid remand, he dropped her at their place, and headed to the forensic laboratory with those keys.

However, even before an eager Radha could have a word with Kavya; armed with an arrest warrant and accompanied by a woman constable, Simon had descended upon 9, Castle Hills, and led away Kavya to the Jubilee Hills Police Station for questioning for the post-mortem had revealed that the couple had died of poisoning.

The next day, Dhruva and Radha reached that Nampally Sessions Court well before Simon had produced Kavya before Purushottam Rao, the magistrate, upon which her searching look met Dhruva's reassuring stare. Then, Jeevan Reddy, the Public Prosecutor, recapped her life from the time of her self-confessed association with the errant couple till their death in *Spandan*. While Kavya heard him impassively, turning eloquent, he stated that she could have murdered her man at the behest of her lover, who would have brooked no rival to him in her bed, and, later tired of the ruffian; she murdered him in cold blood, so as to get out of the rut she willy-nilly got into. Hence, it was immaterial whether she had a motive or not to murder Natya, as, if left alive, she would have exposed the accused to get the noose. So, as it a case of her neck or Natya's, her choice should be clear as sky, even to a novice of a defense lawyer.

What can be more incriminating against the accused, Reddy exhorted, than the very fact that she has had an intimate relationship with all those who died after consuming some slow-acting poison in her house? Besides, there was an eyewitness to testify that a *burka*-clad woman had entered the house the day the young couple could have been poisoned, who else it could but the accused. The prosecutor further asserted that as the circumstantial evidence pointed towards the involvement of the accused in the murder of not only Pravar and Natya but also Ranjit, her husband, her custodial interrogation was imperative in cracking both the cases. Thereby averring that if let loose, she would be able to tamper with whatever little evidence that could 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 seemingly suffers from a selective amnesia as he had conveniently forgotten that the self-same poison also killed Inspector Shakeel, and that he too was last seen with a *burka*-clad woman. Why not the woman, who poisoned Shakeel, was the one who had committed the crimes in *Spandan*, in her proven absence from it? Since she had no acquaintance, much less a motive to kill the cop, 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 peevishly that she would have killed Shakeel too 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, was relevant to the investigation of the other two cases.

As a tamed 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 any compelling reason, but at the same time as he has 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 a regular bail thereafter.

Thanking the magistrate for his fair order, when Kavya submitted that any police presence in her precincts was inimical to her public image, Simon volunteered to withdraw the guard forthwith.

Chapter 23

Depressing Discovery

While Simon took Kavya to the Chanchalguda Jail in his jeep, Dhruva, in his Esteem, drove Radha straight to the *Spandan*, reaching which he led her in after collecting the door key from the guard on duty.

Though she alerted him to a heap of *burkas* on the clothesline in the attached toilet of the master bedroom, 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 frame, he let her take him around the bungalow before he led her out of it.

Getting into the car, though she reminded him about the *burkas* on the clothesline and jocularly thanked him for not having put her through the choking regimen, as he failed to respond, she became anxious, and asked him what was bothering him. However, he merely said that he was wondering how breathless women could be in a *burka* before they get habituated to it, and kept mum pensively thereafter.

Dropping her at home, he headed towards 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 never in usage. Beset with the mixed feelings the findings induced in him, he then drove to the Jubilee Hills Police Station to know what the original Godrej lock had to reveal. Revealing that the lock didn't show any signs of tampering, when Simon said 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, and though probed further by the cop, the detective preferred to keep his cards close to his chest.

However, over drinks that evening with him, 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 him for having falsely implicated Pravar in the fake-notes case, and owing to the Stockholm Syndrome, wasn't it her wont to identify his detractors as her enemies. Besides, aided by Dhruva, having shed the Pravar blinkers, and being enamored of him in turn, were it not possible that she might have thought of erasing her past by eliminating the couple to usher in a new romance in her life?

Saying what if her theories emanated from the Rival Syndrome, he told her that she might as well wait for the answers until he cut the Gordian knot to free her rival under siege, and added in jest that in the meantime, she better reined in her raging jealousy. At that turning coy, she told him that her own future seemed to be under siege by his empathy for her rival, and as he made light of her remark, she said that she was afraid she was no match to Kavya in every which way. Then he told her jocularly that to keep up her spirits; he would like to keep her on high, and as she said that she was a game for it, turning away Raju whenever he came to fetch them for dinner, he goaded her to get really drunk.

However, later seeing her in slumber, he wondered if he was far too indulgent towards Kavya, and thought, in the same vein, whether he became untowardly

suspicious of Radha. Thus torn between the woman he made his own and the woman he was enamored of, he resolved to see the former's place for whatever it might have in store for the latter's fate. So, sneaking out of Radha's bed and asking Raju to keep a watch on her, Dhruva set out on his nocturnal mission to her Red Hills house.

Having gained entry into her house with one of the assorted keys he carried and opening the cupboard with another one, he rummaged through its contents and found her old photograph with a teen that seemed to be Rani his child bearer, staring at which, he turned nostalgic. However, as 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 resembling those of *Spandan's* Godrej lock. Not able to believe what he had seen, he looked for *burkas*, just in case, and finding none, he left the place with those keys and a sample of the potion.

Thus, reaching home in a dilemma as to how to handle Radha, he relieved Raju from his vigil on her, and having secured the evidences and sneaking into her bed, as if to read her mind, he began spying her in a serene sleep. Maybe, she had a 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 then? Was it really the case? If so, won't these bits and pieces jell well to form an inimical whole? Boggled down by myriad thoughts about his companion's motives for those murders, he had a disturbed sleep.

Next morning though as she served him bed coffee, seeing her demeanor, he found it hard to picture her as a murderess, but during their breakfast, he saw a change of color in her when she received a call on her mobile. Saying that her friend had a tiff with her husband, as she left in a huff so as to rush out to help, it was clear to him that it was the anticipated call about the burglary in her house; after all, didn't deliberately keep the main door ajar for some neighbor to smell the rat.

Thus, with the ever-expanding 'volume of evidence' against her, he rushed to the forensic laboratory with the keys and the sample potion he collected from her house, only to return forthwith to wait for her return.

Shortly thereafter, when she returned, regaining her composure, he 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, and added in jest that he only thrashed her a little more than usual. While she said that she was at a loss to see her friend was averse to divorcing him, he said women in an abusive relationship tend to perceive themselves as martyrs, and so it's very hard to pull them out of their self-defeating groove into which they willy-nilly push themselves so as to live in a psychic state of bliss.

That evening, when Dhruva reached the forensic laboratory, he was informed that the potion was indeed a slow acting poison like the one that caused the deaths under investigation and those keys were but crude imitations of *Spandan's* Godrej door key. What with the incriminating evidence in hand, he 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 his 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 against her, 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; as that won't do any good for her cause; it's better to bide his time till he collected the missing links to complete the chain of evidence against Radha.

Chapter 24

The Red Herring

With Kavya in judicial custody, Simon had redoubled his efforts to pin her down to the murders, but seeing no scope for a breakthrough, he thought it was an idea to ascertain the goings on in her camp. Thus, that evening, having made it to 9, Castle Hills, and finding Dhruva with Radha in the portico, he told him that he wanted to have a private talk with him. Then, saying that Radha being his confident and companion, he should not hesitate to open up in her presence, Dhruva suggested that they can as well discuss matters over some drinks.

Then, when they sat down for drinks, Simon said that as Dhruva could be aware, the media, dubbing the crimes as 'poison murders' has already started ridiculing the police for their failure to nab the culprits, and then lamented how all the clues to Kavya's culpability came to naught. And yet, he said that he had a hunch that she, with her exposure to law and her acquaintance with a criminal could be a readymade murderess, and with a little bit of luck, he might stumble upon the required evidence to nail her to have the last laugh. Wondering whether he was directing his shot at him, the detective told him that he should not mistake his own empathy for his client as his constraint to shield her; and assured the cop that he would not lose a moment in alerting him if ever he found any worthwhile evidence against her.

Lauding Dhruva for his professional ethics, when Simon said that he was hopeful of laying his hands on some damning stuff or the other against her, sooner than later; the detective opined that if a criminal investigation were to be driven by an urge to fix someone, whom we want to see as the guilty one, then that would only end up being in the no-man's-land. At that, as Simon admitted, maybe, it was wrong to club all the murders, Dhruva averred that thanks to the media, as all are aware that a *burka*-clad woman could have poisoned Ranjit; what if someone else 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 with Pravar, if not Natya, who, being his companion, might have become an unintended victim.

Then, agreeing that maybe it was the right approach to de-link the deaths, after a couple of drinks, though Radha wanted him to stay for dinner, Simon took leave of them.

However, when only four days were left of Kavya's judicial remand, as the cop wanted to get it extended by another fortnight, the public prosecutor told him that unless they presented a compelling case for her continued detention, the court was bound to grant her an unconditional bail at the scheduled hearing.

Thus, as Simon was reconciled to Kavya's release, as the telephone operator told him that just then a woman rang up to inform that a vital clue of the 'poison murders' could be obtained at 9, Castle Hills. Though excited at that, yet he wondered whether it was fair to raid Dhruva house after he gave his word to alert him, if ever he finds anything against her; but, maybe, he was oblivious of the inimical clue as he would not have pried upon Kavya, his client, and a guest at the same time. So, it's obvious that Radha had stumbled upon some vital clue; surely, she wouldn't have alerted him on a wrong lead; why would she compromise herself by embarrassing the detective? So, as it can't be a false alarm, it made a case for the raid; more so, was it not his police dharma to act on specific leads?

Next morning, when Simon descended upon 9, Castle Hills, with a search warrant, Dhruva said that he didn't think there were any skeletons in his cupboards and yet the

cop was welcome to do have his way. But apologizing for the embarrassment, and saying that, to start with, he would only confine himself to Kavya's room in absentia, Simon began his search for unknown evidence. At length, what with a bottle of some potion found on the floor 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; so after the formalities of signing the papers and sealing the samples were completed, the cop left with one of the samples to the forensic lab.

However, having watched it all from the sidelines and wondering why Dhruva was not perturbed as expected, as Radha said where all that would lead Kavya to, he told her that he was certain that the arm of her destiny would overpower the hidden hand of adversity. So, unable to comprehend his conviction about Kavya's innocence and his confidence of her redemption, she withdrew into her room, but finding him morose even when they were having lunch together, 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, loses the key of her cell as well. For once, not amused by the turn of his phrase, she tried to study his visage 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, for long, he remained sad on Radha's account.

However, after a while, he read Rani's letter that sealed Radha's fate.

My Man:

Having fathered my child what else are you but 'my man'.

Even as I sat at the table to pen a 'Thank You' note to you for having blessed me with your Xerox Boy, I received a letter from my Shyamala auntie to inform me that while she was out of the country, some Kavya had been to her place in Guntur to ascertain the whereabouts of Ranjit, who once ditched my friend Radha.

Since that Kavya wanted the information to be posted to your address, maybe she's the *Operation Checkmate* wife of the very man who ditched my friend, whom you could be nursing now under your investigative wings (or more!).

So be it, but coming to the point, while I was still in Waltair, my childhood friend Radha - she was wont to say that I am her half-namesake and full-soul mate - having eloped with her neighbor Ranjit to Guntur, sent me their wedding photograph, just in case (attached herewith); so I put her to my Shyamala auntie there for whatever it was worth. Later I came to know from my auntie that having been deserted by him, she returned to Waltair, but by then as our family had shifted to Hyderabad; I lost contact with her.

However, had I heeded to your suggestion to meet Kavya's man that day in (y)our place, maybe I would have known if he's the one who ditched my friend; also I'm beginning to wonder whether Radha the alleged murderess you were so obsessed with, is indeed Radha, my friend.

But still, if my inputs are of any use to you, I would feel that I've contributed to your cause, which may recompense you for my entry into your life on a false note; as for your entry into me, as I've told you, it's not only fulfilling but fruitful as well.

Now I've come to believe that it's not fair on my part to deny your fatherly need to see how your son looks like, so I shall send our boy's photograph, as, and when, his features begin to show your resemblances.

Ever Yours,

Rani

Seeing that photograph all again, he saw the irony of life and the hand of destiny in the affairs of man for unwittingly Rani had provided the means that undo her own friend. Then wondering how the one-time friends, unknown to each other, had converged on him to serve their own ends, he reminisced the time he spent with both of them.

Soon though, stirred by the finding, when Dhruva reached the Jubilee Hills Police Station, Simon received him with a sheepish look as the 'poison' he seized from Kavya's room turned out to be an inane solution. Thus, shamed by the fiasco, as the cop apologized, the detective, who came to trust him by then, briefed him 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. What with Kavya's release on hand, Radha cynically planted the 'fake thing' beneath her cupboard and induced the police to look for it, which was heinous and unpardonable; and to say the least, her malicious intent to send an innocent to the gallows, eclipses all her murderous acts put together.

Then, as Dhruva concluded with the parody on the adulterated liquor - the Scotch you drink is not the Scotch you think - and said that the bottle that Radha planted beneath Kavya's cupboard 'did not contain the poison she thought it contained'; Simon's face acquired the look of a devout.

Wiser for his reverses though, as the cop wanted the proof of Radha having possessed the 'real thing' before he acted against her, the detective gave him the original bottle of poison that was bound to contain her fingerprints. However, as Simon still remained skeptical about her motive to murder Ranjit, Dhruva showed him her wedding photograph with Ranjit, who jilted her.

Then, on their way to the forensic laboratory, Dhruva unraveled the story of Radha's life abused by Ranjit, scandalized by Pravar, and brutalized by Shakeel.

Chapter 25

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. Stunned though by the unexpected turn of the events, as she remained cool and wanted to know what evidence he had against her, the cop said that her fingerprints were found on the bottle containing the poison that was traced in the victims' viscera. While she was still reeling from the shock of his disclosure, rattling her further, when he 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. Then, as the cop revealed that it was the detective who had gathered all the evidences against her, a shattered Radha offered to surrender.

When Simon produced her in the court, as Dhruva kept himself away, Radha said that she was willing to confess to her crimes, and the magistrate allowed her 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 the impending trial, and I have no reservations on that count for it is not my intention to evade the rightful sentence. Moreover, the aim of this painful confession is not to earn sympathy or reprieve for myself as I am looking forward to the gallows to end my burden of living. After all, following my those adventures, an act of murder is no mean an adventure, now I seek death, the most formidable adventure of life for it forays into the unknown.

When Ranjit ditched me, though I was pregnant with his child, I blamed only myself for having blindly yielding to him and then naively eloping with him. But his later day refusal to help the hapless Raghu, the child I bore for him, that too after using me all again, induced in me an enduring hatred for him. So, I came to see him as the cause of my fall and began to abhor him with all my heart and soul; and as Madhu, the man I married, started humiliating my boy, calling him a bastard, my bitterness to the deserter only increased. Then, when my son, unable to bear the slights, committed suicide on the railway track, how I wished that Ranjit met with 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, somehow the cop developed an urge to humiliate me; so on the pretext of collecting vital clues, he was wont to take me out of the jail to rape me at gunpoint. Worse still, he began sharing me with the magistrate to prolong my judicial custody, 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 that Pravar was the kingpin of the counterfeit racket, though I felt the latter got his just deserts, I was seized with an urge to avenge against the former. Then, guided by the hand of the combined destiny - of the prey and its hounds - so it seems, I chanced to see Detective Dhruva's ad for an assistant lady sleuth. Thus, sensing that a stint with him may lead me to the avenues of avenge, maybe 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.

However, when I saw him, 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 the Stockholm Syndrome, Kavya would be pushing Ranjit back onto my anvil of avenge that too in tow with Pravar, and if anything, as my proximity to the detective brought the cop too under my radar, I found myself drawing the triangle of revenge. Then, as if their destiny of death had beckoned me, I laid my hands on that potion of slow-acting poison; but how I were to know in that my fate too played foul with my life that I was recasting in the mould of love! Just the same, my criminal need for a guinea pig to test the potency of that poison and to calibrate the right dosage to seal their fate made Dacey the first 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 could bring about his end; so seized with an urge to see

the turmoil of a cuckold, I contrived to meet him, and as he came to beg me to forget the past and grant it to him again, I led him up the garden path. Oh, what a vicarious pleasure I used to derive in sexually torturing him before I ended it all for him with that fatal dose! But by then, as my love for Dhruva began to rule my heart and soul, thereby 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 too fell into my trap when I invited him to share some clues to tie Kavya's hands with Ranjit's murder. So when we met in my Red Hills house, I induced him to have some drinks with me, and he readily agreed, maybe hoping that the rendezvous could end up in my bed, only to be dead in his own bed. What with my old wounds thus opened up, I wanted to plant my kiss of death on the 'malicious magistrate' too, but to my peculiar disappointment, I came to know that by then 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 him not to suspect her hand in it. So, having accessed her door key from her handbag to make the duplicates, I raked my brains for a plan that would have spared Natya and yet snared Pravar into the *Spandan*. How badly I wanted to tend her as my daughter being Dhruva's woman, 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 a *supari* for them. Then, I convinced her that the safest place for them to hide was the *Spandan*, and, so, she led Pravar, and sadly, herself as well, to their poisonous end. So, when Natya came to collect the key to their deathtrap, I made her wear a *burka* and gave her the poisoned food for dinner, promising to fetch them breakfast the next morning.

But in spite everything, as Dhruva put his stakes on Kavya, I was torn between my old sexual jealousy and my new lesbian libido. However, when it became clear that it was a question of her neck or my neck, I sought to implicate her with the 'poison bottle', and to my dismay, he saved the day for her by replacing it with some impotent potion. Maybe, what really spoiled the show for me was Ranjit's old photograph with me, and it's as though 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!

So finished Radha 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.

Chapter 26

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, but as he had finished with it, seeing him overwhelmed with grief, 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, he wanted her to read it herself, and in turn, having finished it in tears; she sank into his chest only to wet his shirt, even as he wetted her head. Holding each other thus, for long, they cried for the woman, whose fate hanged in the criminal balance.

However, in time, when he wished that she pleaded Radha's case in the court as well, she said that though she would have loved to do that, 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.

When the cop wanted to know how and when the detective came to suspect the culprit, Kavya said that the recap might as well help him unwind himself but as Dhruva felt that his narrative might embarrass her as well, she assured him, notwithstanding Simon's presence, 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 by 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. But 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.

However, 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 in the *Spandan* 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 there.

When Simon told him that the deceased ate packed food, the plot only got thickened, though 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? Whatever such a course was far easier for her, right, 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, who was the cause of one's hurt, 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 the *Spandan* after their death. With the lock being unhampered, it was evident that the ill-fated couple was snared into the dwelling, but why would Kavya have 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 with him, it was apparent that her hands were clean.

What about the *burka*-clad woman, a common factor in all the murders? He 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 it? Why *burkas* in the *Spandan* were lying in the wrong place, normally Natya could have hung hers on the clothes-line of the guest room's bathroom and not in 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, if she were behind it all, not to get rid of them; so they were clearly planted to derail the investigation, 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 main 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, intentionally or otherwise, for as corpses they could not have helped the culprit to get 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 as the house key that Kavya brought with her to his place showed traces of wax on it, it was clear that culprit got the duplicate keys made out of it – one to enable the duo to enter into the *Spandan* and another for her subsequent entry into it to retrieve the one she gave them. Who could have done that? Not the Rajus for sure.

As it was evident that Natya could have been a collateral damage, who would have wanted to eliminate Pravar to implicate Kavya? Why not Radha? After all, she had every reason to see the end of Shakeel, if not in Ranjit, so he set out to her Red Hills house for hard clues, and found those keys and the poison. 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 his house, while he, fearing that a peeved Radha could poison Kavya too, had substituted it with a harmless potion (he felt Kavya's caress at 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 the *Spandan*; Dhruva said that, in that case, instead of Radha, she would have been hard-pressed fending to avoid the noose. As Kavya felt that it was ironical that such a thin thread should have separated justice and injustice; he averred that it was in the nature 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 and Shakeel's murder, who knew, she would have had the last laugh. Then, 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 well she cared for it, but as is apparent in the hindsight, she was only monitoring how the poison worked on it.

At that, overcome with grief, as Dhruva said Dicey's death at Radha's hands makes him feel bitter about her, leaning on him, Kavya said in all empathy that like its killer, the pet too was a victim of victim-hood.

Chapter 27

A Poignant End

Next day, 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 of seeing him, she was averse to recounting her crimes to any lawyer, but if Kavya were willing, she would love to meet her.

Thus, when Kavya was led away to meet Radha, Dhruva pleaded with Prativadi to bear with Radha's reluctance until they got her around into the defense groove.

So, even as Kavya set out with empathy, Radha awaited her in repentance, and when they made an eye contact, they couldn't take their eyes off each other; but when Kavya neared her, Radha lowered her gaze. But as 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, Radha wiped them with a feeling of oneness. So, when Kavya took Radha into her tender arms to convey her empathy, she could feel her resurgent hope in her quivering frame, and when Kavya said Prativadi was sure to save her skin, Radha said she would like to entrust her case 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. Before the end of that evocative meeting, having discovered her latent fondness for Radha, when Kavya whispered in Radha's ear about her own lesbian leanings towards her, as an elated Radha planted a kiss on Kavya's lips, they both had their first taste of lesbian love.

Soon, as it was time for them to part for the day, Radha gave Kavya the missive that she penned for Dhruva.

On Kavya's return, as Prativadi was led up to Radha to take her brief, Dhruva began reading Radha's letter.

Darling:

I am ashamed that I let you down. What a fate it is to betray your trust and belittle my love! While I lost my way with you, blinded by revenge, constrained by guilt, I've to hide my face from you; and that's the tragedy of my life. Don't I know how hard I made it for you, so I don't want to add any more, but with your understanding (I know I can't seek your forgiveness) I shall await the noose with fortitude.

What with the fake-notes 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 its axe in my hand to grind it on the anvil of revenge, forged by the poison of abuse. How sad that I allowed my bitterness towards a deceiver to belittle my affection for my

benefactor that is even as I was recasting my shattered life in the mould of his love, you know who.

While I shamefully pried upon Mithya's cupboards, I chanced upon her personal jottings and her long-lost daughter's photograph that has striking resemblances to Natya, and when I showed it to her, as she identified it as hers, I felt like I was her own mother. However, I curbed my impulse to reveal her identity to you, but as she fitted in my game plan, so I bought time, as it were to her peril. Then sadly for me, I discovered the poison that Mithya acquired; you know for what, and with that my urge for revenge got the better of my love for you. But on the other hand, I was more determined than ever to see Pravar's end, if only to end Natya's misery.

Believe me; I wanted to come out clean with you after I was done with the despicable trio, in the hope that you would own me as you had once owned Mithya, in spite of everything. Probably you would have, had not Ranjit's murder pushed Kavya into your enamored fold, for you have a peculiar weakness for feminine criminality. But after that *ménage a trios* with Pravar and Natya, how odd it would have been for her 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. But then, is my life any less ironical than Kavya's - Ranjit jilted me for her money, and I lost you to her love. Is there a parallel to it by way of fact or fiction?

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

Yours not to be,

Radha

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

When she too finished reading it with tear-filled eyes, he told her 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 to share his agony, he sought self-solace in her embrace. Then 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 finished the schooling. However, when she was sixteen, even as her mother went to the U.S to spend some time with her sister, their father's new assignment involved touring all the while. That fortuitously left her brother and her together for most of the time, which happenstance, in the formative years of their sexuality, ushered in an unusual togetherness between them that insensibly led them into an incestuous relationship.

On her return even as her mother was horrified at seeing her four-month pregnant daughter, amplifying her misery, her errant son had hanged himself, leaving Mithya to bear their shame, for abortion by then became out of redeem, which forced her parents to let her deliver her sin in secrecy. While her father gave away her girl child to an orphanage, given the abnormality of its being, she 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 a guilt complex. Thereafter, as a way of psychic escape for all of them, her father sent her to Hyderabad to let her pursue her higher studies.

Later, while the nuptials with Ashok erased the shame of incest in her subconscious, as she was morally constrained in bearing a child having orphaned one, the prospect of conception instilled in her a sense of foreboding. But when 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 have to make for that. So, leaving her to fend for herself, when he left for Dubai for raising the capital for a grandiose venture, so as to engage herself, she took up a job. In time though, as his irregular letters failed to fill her emotional void, for they failed to pen his longing for her, she saw the futility of holding herself anymore.

So, pondering over how to go about her peccadilloes, she opted for one-night stands for they wouldn't be intrusive, but her escapades that catered to her sexual needs, had 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; so as if to address the emotional neglect and to shore up her self-worth, she started an affair with a colleague she fancied, which, however, ended abruptly when his distressed wife committed suicide; she fared no better in her next venture as her lover deserted her, when his spouse threatened to divorce him.

So, wearied of wooing married men, she sank into a bachelor's arms at the next turn, and as his virgin ardor matched her raging craving, she felt that she was in the seventh heaven. But in time, as his innate need to have a family of his own broke their liaison, she was back to square one, and vexed with the vagaries of peer encounters, 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 in the shop and cater to her in her bed.

When she all but forgot about Ashok, he returned with mounds 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 Indian operations of an Italian mafia. While she was ill at ease with his escapades, Ashok was restive at Dilip's presence in his house, and 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 on the sly. But matters came to a head after they shifted into the newly acquired bungalow at 9, Castle Hills, when Ashok wanted her to fire her hireling and she insisted that he be allowed to stay put in their A.C. Guards house that they vacated.

While Ashok decided to bide for time, seeing the writing on the wall, Dilip, played up her man's neglect of her, and made her believe that there was another woman in his life, out to take her position. Soon, he contrived to convince her that Ashok entertained the idea of eliminating her altogether and also 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 of getting rid of her man and get away with it as well.

However, 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 father had disowned her for her amoral ways, she had informed her mother 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 an embrace of solace. Amidst their myriad emotions in their state of closeness, 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. However, 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. Whatever, as the mother wanted to take her to the orphanage, where her daughter was left, the daughter felt that it would be far better for her mother to first befriend the girl, and then prepare her for the reunion before she herself took her under her wings.

So, Mithya hoped that once her mother rediscovered her daughter, she would redeem herself by adopting her own daughter, but shortly after her return home, when her mother informed her that only the previous month, her girl had left the orphanage without a trace, Mithya was truly devastated. But after he came into her life, stirred by the resurgent maternal impulses, she wanted to have children, but, sadly, her two conceptions ended in miscarriages. Wondering why Mithya never showed her daughter's picture to him that Radha laid her hands on, he said, maybe, by then having learned to get over her past, she had put her daughter's memories too on the back burner.

So, as he 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. Agreeing with her, 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, but for that kidnap maybe she herself would have discovered Natya's photograph, and that would have been a different story altogether. Well, 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 end to the mischief, the sense of insecurity could ensue.

Then, he 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; and maybe 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 also 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.

When 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, smug in her embrace, he confessed to her that he loved her like none else. At that, as she told him that she would ever think aloud with him, he said, in jest, that his ears would forever be wide open, and she crooned into them that she came to love her rival too, and added that as and when she came out of the cage, he should let her nestle at 9, Castle Hills, in their ménage a trois.

Then, even as he was reaching for her lips that uttered those words after his heart, as if to remind him that it was a public place, Prativadi was about to reach them with the *vakalat*, at which, pointing at the last lines of Radha's letter, Kavya said coyly that if he chooses to take her to the altar, she would be coming with the *Oasis Builders* for a dowry. Then, even as the lawyer came in the earshot, he said to her ears only that he hopes to have their heirs in time to 9, Castle Hills and *Spandan* as well.