

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

-A SIYA RAJPUT MYSTERY

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Chapter 1

The killer waited for her inside the roof of her own house.

He had been observing her every move. He knew his time would come. Over the past few days, he had come to know so many things about her. He knew she snored at night and lazed in the bed for ten minutes in the morning before she got up. He knew the time at which she left for work, the time at which she got back and the brand of toothpaste she used; hell, he had even handed it over to her with a smile on his face five days back at a grocery store. He also knew what she had for breakfast—jam and toast on most days along with fruits—and how she double checked the locks of her house at night. He loved the way she smiled while checking herself out in the mirror after her bath before sleeping.

But there were still so many things he wanted to know about her. Like how the veins on her neck would stand up when his hands grabbed her throat and her lungs started screaming for oxygen. Or if her eyes would light up the same way on seeing him the way they did on seeing her husband.

He would find out soon.

Supriya Kelkar did not know she was being watched.

The moon was full and a fuzzy red, hanging in a cloudless sky in the cold January night. Supriya pulled over in front of her house and got out of her car. The main gate of the bungalow creaked when she pushed past it. She groaned, promising herself she would oil it the next day. She veered her car into the parking of her house.

With one smooth motion, she slipped into a long jacket, slung her purse across her body and stepped out, locking the car behind her. She walked straight for the door, the hard soles of her shoes echoed in the night's stillness.

He watched her from a slit in the window. Anticipation crept up inside him. He had the entire night and the next day to himself with her. He knew her family was away. The stars had aligned; he thought. Not that he believed in luck, or thought he needed it. His preparation was always top-notch. Knowing the amount of time he had with her excited him thoroughly. He heard her enter the house. He stayed in the shadows.

Supriya made herself a cup of hot chocolate. She sank in an armchair. She closed her eyes and thought about the next day. She would get well-deserved rest after a non-stop schedule for almost an entire month. She would sleep the entire day tomorrow. She thought she would pick up a cheesy romance novel in the afternoon. Noodles were her comfort food. She might order some for lunch the next day. Then, as her husband and kids were away, she would spend the evening with her friends. Having thought of all of that, she could not wait to see her family day after. They were supposed to be back from her parents' house in Mumbai. The thought of seeing them kept her warm even as the temperature dropped to late single digits.

She was consumed in her own world as she dragged herself to go upstairs. She thought of sleeping on the couch itself. But the cosiness of her bed made it a more tempting prospect. She glanced at the door once to make sure it was locked. Satisfied, she broke step for her bedroom.

A chill ran up her neck.

Maybe I have left a window open.

She went back and checked the windows. All were shut tight. Having come close to the kitchen, she decided she would treat herself to a Cassata, her favourite ice-cream. She put on a Kishore Kumar song as she waited for the ice-cream to melt enough so she could slice it into her plate. She was glad she would be in the comfort of her bed in a few minutes, spending an evening in blissful solitude. She sang out loud the chorus of *Pal Pal Dil Ke Paas* as she went upstairs.

Once in her bed, she texted her husband she missed him. She watched television while devouring on her Cassata. She put her plate aside after she was done and then shut the lights.

He had been listening to her all throughout from outside her room. He could not wipe the smile on his face. How could he? She had no idea he was there, counting down her life. He casually walked inside her dark room. Like every time she was alone at home, she had left her bedroom door open. Six strides got him near her bed.

He saw her bosoms rise and fall, rise and fall. He dropped his knees to the ground next to her bed. Watching her sleep was a meditative experience. He watched her for almost an hour. He raised his hand and put it on her forehead extremely slowly. Electricity flowed through him. The smile on his face turned into a grin. He did not remember when he had last felt so alive.

Supriya moved in her bed. She put a hand to squatch away the fly near her head. She hated it when they buzzed in her ear while she was sleeping. Her fingers brushed against his. He held her hand like they were lovers walking down a park.

She took a beat to realize it was not a fly. And then one more to know what it was.

A hand on her mouth stifled her scream.

She turned around, her eyes popping out with fear. He continued grinning. It was finally happening. He withdrew his hand just for a fraction to hear her scream. *Oh, it is so much more bloody sweeter than I had imagined.* His heart beat faster, seeing her eyes turn red. His hands itched, wanting to get a piece of her soon.

Supriya went numb in fear. She tried to move. But he had pinned her down. She froze. Then, he let her go. She was surprised. *What the hell was happening?* She jumped out of the bed and pushed backwards, running from him, running for the door—her only escape.

They always thought they had a chance to get away. He loved to see them believe they could continue to live after he had decided otherwise. He leapt forward and pulled Supriya by her hair.

She fell down. He gagged her with a pillow cover and tossed her on the bed. Her body shuddered. Next thing she knew, she could not breathe. *His hands are on my neck.* She tried to push them away. She gripped his hands, her fingernails digging into the leather gloves. Her vision faded out.

Suddenly, she could breathe. She heaved loudly, sucking in as much air as she could. Just when her breathing evened, he pressed into her throat once again. He applied more pressure this time and tightened his grip. He saw her skin change colour. It turned red first and then a lighter shade of blue. He again released his grip. Her body trembled. Her breaths turned into a sharp wail. He knew each breath would pain. She would soon wish she died instead.

And what was he if not a granter of wishes?

He gripped her neck again. She again put her hands on her neck. *Even now she thinks she can live.* She kept trying... trying... until the light behind her eyes went out.

He smiled, knowing he was just getting started.

Chapter 2

My thirtieth birthday was just two hours away and I wondered what I wanted from the coming year. I was in my armchair by a window, reading a book. A quilt kept me warm and the hot coffee in my hand was satisfying my taste buds while jolting just the right amount of dopamine in my body. Suddenly, my mouth went dry and a cold wash swept down my back as I thought about something that I had to deal with in a week's time.

I was distracted by Shadow as he came up to me, wagging his tail, smelling his treat that I had kept on the floor. He licked it off in one sweep of his tongue and then looked at me with hopeful eyes, wanting more. I stroked his head twice which was a sign for him to know he would not get any more food. I was glad to have him in my life.

'We should get a dog,' my sister, Radha, had said last year. The two of us had always wanted one, and it seemed like a good idea to get one then. For the first time in years, I had a set routine with my new college teaching job. Radha had just graduated from business school and had started working at a trading firm. She could also help me with raising him in his early years. Our only challenge was convincing Shama, my sister-in-law. She agreed after a few days of Radha showing her dog videos and promising her that our dog would not jump on her. She feared them then. Shama is now the most playful with Shadow.

She stays with us as my brother is in the Army, stationed in Kashmir. Every time he was placed near the border, the Army did not encourage families to move and so Shama had been staying with us for the past year and a half.

‘We should get a male dog,’ I had said, owing to the already heavy presence of oestrogen in the house.

Radha and Shama had liked my idea and so we took in Shadow, and that's how he became the only male member of our household. He was a rescue dog. To date, we do not know his breed. All we know is that he looks regal in his golden coat and wavy fur and that he is the most adorable cuddle partner.

My mind drifted again. My fingers tingled. I was not big on birthday resolutions. But I had one agenda. It was regarding my license to practice law in India. It was up for renewal in a week's time. It should have been a non-agenda, to be honest. I knew I was not going to renew it, but a heavy knot tugged me from inside every time I thought about it. At times, the mere act of not doing something is harder than doing it. It had been three years since I walked away from that life. I was not going to go back to it. I had made a grave mistake, one that caused me pain every day. Even the thought of it made my breathing unsteady. I tried to push away the uneasiness that crept up on me.

I had used the license sparingly in the past three years, mostly the previous two, and only to earn money by providing legal advice on minor things like start-up contracts, marriage certificates and copyright policies. A pang of pain spurted inside me every time I saw any legal document but with Radha's college fees and the household expenses, I had no other choice.

Coupled with a steady outflow from my savings, we had somehow got by. Now that I was teaching at a college, the income had got steady. I settled deeper into the armchair and resumed reading my book. But my mind wandered. Once again, I began thinking about the mistake I had made. My face burnt. My hands turned to ice. *Will the guilt ever go away?* I closed my

eyes. I wished for the thirty-first year of my life to be quiet, one in which I made more progress in rebuilding my life.

Just then, I heard Radha's two-wheeler pull over in front of our house. I peeped out from the window and saw her fiancé, Rahul, sitting behind her, holding a big box that I guessed was my birthday cake. Shadow would have smelt them because he leapt from the bed and rushed down for a hearty welcome. Within the next beat, the doorbell was ringing.

I was alone at home. Shama had found a few days with Karan while he had retreated from the India-Pakistan border. I set aside my coffee cup, whipped away the quilt and started for the door. My license renewal was coming up at the worst stage. For the first time in three years, I had started to feel normal. I could breathe more freely and a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

All I wanted for my thirtieth birthday was a quiet year—the same old boring, as at times, the monotony of a routine is all you require to get your life back on track. Happy birthday, Siya, I wished myself with an hour and a half to go for my birthday.

Chapter 3

Senior Investigating Officer Kapil Rathod's phone buzzed on the dashboard of his car just as he pulled out of the parking lot of the Pune Branch of CID. He stopped halfway and put the phone on speaker.

'We've got an emergency,' a voice he recognized said. It belonged to his partner, Senior Investigating Officer, Mahesh Bhalerao. 'They've found a body at Sunshine Apartments in Koregaon Park. It looks like a bloody mess. Young woman. First responders from the scene can see hand marks around the neck. Lots of blood everywhere. I'm going there right now.'

'I'll be there. Send me the location,' Rathod said.

'I sent it right before I called you,' he said and paused. 'Oh God, why did this have to happen today? My wife and I had just come back from our anniversary dinner. Instead of everything else, I must deal with a dead body.'

Rathod shook his head, laughing. People would have found Bhalerao's quip humourless. But spend time long enough around dead bodies and even the softest tickles can spark toe curling laughter.

'The forensic team is already on its way,' Bhalerao said and clicked off.

The address Bhalerao sent was in Koregaon Park, an upmarket area in Pune. The construction of the metro line in the city meant that even night driving was a pain. Curses and honking greeted commuters. Rathod took half an hour to get to the location of the crime, a lane with big and lavish bungalows on either

side and trees that were much older than anyone living on the street.

Three police cruisers were already parked outside. Two officers manned the main gate of the bungalow. A news van already present. He wondered how they got their information. The officers saluted Rathod as he walked in.

The bungalow was huge. Three floors, Rathod noted. It had a lavish garden and creepers climbed the bungalow walls. Investment in plants and shrubbery was often a sign of immense wealth more than anything else in Rathod's experience. Who else would have the will to spend money or time on them in today's world? However, his own mother was an exception to the rule. Despite belonging to a modest household, she had always spiced up their house with new flowering and medicinal plants.

The forensics team bagged Rathod's shoes with plastic. He slipped into a white plastic coat. He put on a tight cap. There were two golden rules in securing a crime scene. First, nothing from outside should be introduced to the crime scene that originally did not belong there. And second, nothing should be moved in the crime scene before carefully registering its position. They could use every small clue to find the criminal. The smallest grain of sand or the tip of anyone's hair could guide the police to the criminal. Losing that to contamination would be a pity.

Once armed in the plastic suit, Rathod was guided by another officer to a bedroom on the second floor of the house. The room had at least six people in it, doing their own bit. Bhalerao was in a corner, talking to Dr. Sonia Joshi, CID's medical examiner.

Rathod's attention was drawn to the bed. He broke step for it, narrowing his eyes. A woman lay on it. Her were eyes

open but she was dead and naked. There were marks around the woman's neck, suggesting she had been strangled. The cause of death would only be confirmed once the autopsy was performed.

On a closer examination, Rathod realized the woman's body had been arranged in a particular way. She lay on her back. Her hands were by her side. Her legs were straight. Her head rested completely on a pillow. If anyone put a blanket on her, she could very well be sleeping, dreaming the kind of dream that she was excited about after getting up but forgot the ending when she told it to her friends. But, the woman was strangled. The bed should have been disturbed. The sheets should not have been clean and crisp.

Bhalerao broke step for Rathod. He said, 'Sonia said preliminary examination suggests the woman was raped.'

Rathod noticed the woman's body was not stiff from rigour mortis, which told him she had been dead for over twelve hours because that's how long it takes for muscles to stiffen and then relax again from lack of oxygen after dying.

'What do we have?' Rathod said, looking around the room.

'Victim's name is Supriya Kelkar. She's thirty-four years old and married with two children. The husband and kids are visiting the grandparents in Mumbai. They'll be here tomorrow morning. The wife could not go with them because she had work.'

'Who found her?'

Bhalerao paused. 'Hold that thought. You'd first want to see this. Come with me,' he said and broke step away to the right towards the room's bathroom.

Rathod followed him.

The bathroom was a slaughterhouse. Blood splashed the walls red. It had trickled down, painting streams on its way. The blood was also all over the tiles. The bathroom, despite being horrific, seemed familiar. *Why? What was it?* The answer came to him and the hair on his body stood up.

Suddenly, Rathod wanted to step out for a moment. The coppers, ironically almost inhuman smell of blood made him nauseous. Even the most experienced murder detectives felt funny in the stomach at times. He counted to ten. The moment passed.

He went back in.

Rathod stared at the bathroom walls. He now remembered. How could he forget? Another crime scene from sixteen years ago had a similar bathroom. A woman named Naina Rajput had gone disappeared. She was still missing and presumed dead by most. The bathroom of her house looked similar the day she disappeared. The person accused of taking her was caught five years back and was in jail, serving his sentence. In fact, Naina's daughter, Siya Rajput, a lawyer and private detective, had played a big role in capturing him. Rathod had worked with Siya for several years until she had gone under the radar three years back.

Because of the rumbling in his mind, Rathod only noticed what was bang in the middle of the bathroom when Bhalerao pointed it out to him. A circle was drawn with blood on the floor. Something was placed in the middle of the circle.

'Wait...,' Rathod said. 'That can't be right.' He stepped forward, going as close as he could without disrupting the splatter on the ground. 'Is that a...a lock of hair?' he said.

The lock of hair was thick. Some strands had been pulled out from the root. For something associated with beauty, Rathod had not felt more petrified and numb as he looked at it.

The shock of the sight slowed Rathod down for a beat. He pictured the woman outside. He peeped out and double checked.

Bhalerao read his partner's mind. He said, 'Dr. Sonia Joshi confirmed that hair doesn't belong to our victim—Supriya Kelkar.'

The horrific implication of that hit Rathod. He said, 'What the hell. That means it is someone else's. Are there two bodies?'

'Not yet. I can only confirm if that hair came from a dead person after testing it,' a woman's voice said.

Rathod turned around. It was Dr. Sonia Joshi.

'When are you performing the autopsy?' he asked.

Sonia referred to her watch. 'It's ten thirty right now. I've got more autopsies to do but I guess because of the gruesome nature of this murder, I will put this on top of my priority list. I'll try to get done by tomorrow noon,' she said. 'I'm done taking samples in the bedroom. My team has swept everything. I'm almost finished with the bathroom as well. My team might take more time to get all the samples. I'll give you their analysis by tomorrow noon,' she said and put her bag down to get to work.

Rathod and Bhalerao went out again. They examined the woman's body. Rathod could not help think about Siya Rajput's mother—Naina. *Is there a connection between her disappearance and this murder?*

Chapter 4

Radha must have had the house keys because the ringing stopped when I reached the base of the stairs, I saw her get in.

‘We’ve got your favourite cake,’ she declared and ran towards me. She opened the box to show the cake to me. It was a pineapple cake. ‘Happy birthday best ever sister, Siya,’ Radha read the message on it out loud.

I could not help but marvel at my little sister. At twenty-six, she had already turned into a magnificent young woman. Rahul followed her in, holding bags in both his hands. ‘And I’ve got some Chinese food,’ he said with a grin.

I felt ecstatic. I was grateful to have Radha and Rahul in my life. Things were finally getting better and falling into place. It had all started two weeks back. I had accidentally picked up Rahul’s phone, thinking it was mine and had seen him looking at wedding rings. I had kept the phone away very quickly, feeling bad about invading his privacy while at the same time bursting inside with happiness. Later that day, he had asked me on his own, in confidence, if he could marry Radha. I had not been happier at any point in my life than I was then. In fact, that day marked a new phase in my recovery. I gave Radha’s ring size to Rahul. I told Shama about the planned proposal after taking Rahul’s permission. Then, the three of us went out several times to look for a ring for Radha. We had finally loved one. Rahul was going to buy it once he got his month’s salary.

Radha set up the table while Rahul took the plates. Just as I went to the small bar cabinet, Radha said, ‘Tell us what you want. You’re going to be treated like a queen today.’

I laughed and said, 'But my birthday is yet to start.'

'Sit back and enjoy,' Radha said, setting the burnt garlic noodles, chicken manchurian, hot and sour gravy and schezwan rice on the table.

She clicked her fingers and Shadow ran towards her. She set one bone on the ground. Shadow grabbed it with his teeth and sat at his usual spot – on a rug near the dining table.

By the time we were done, it was a minute to midnight. Radha and Rahul scampered to the kitchen. They came out a minute later, singing happy birthday with a cake in hand, complete with three candles on top. Radha placed it in front of me.

She hugged me tightly and whispered in my ear, 'I love you the most.'

I closed my eyes to make a wish. I knew I was too old to make birthday wishes but it was a compulsory tradition in the Rajput house, enforced by our mother and encouraged by our father. We kept doing such seemingly childish things to honour their memory. We had remembered them every day for the past sixteen years. On occasions like these, we missed them even more. Our life had changed completely when both of them had disappeared within three months of each other.

Chapter 5

Kapil Rathod returned to the bedroom.

He stood next to the bed. Sonia had told them her team had finished photographing the bedroom. Samples from everywhere had been taken. He could move the body now. He could verify his hypothesis. He bent down and lifted the woman's body from the shoulder. Her skin was pale but bruised dark purple under her neck, a result of livor mortis – a process in which blood settles to the lowest point in the body due to gravity. It was useful to determine if a body had been moved post-death. He then lifted the woman's back. It had the same pigmentation across the surface of the back. He moved further lower and lifted her pelvis. The pigmentation was darker there, suggesting more blood had settled behind her pelvis and she was probably sitting when she had died.

Rathod suspected the killer moved the woman's body after she died to make the bed. He did not know why. His small test proved that her body had been moved after she had died. The luminol test could probably reveal a bloody area somewhere in the room.

Rathod's mind went back to the hair in the bathroom. The way it was arranged, it was almost as if the purpose of murdering the woman outside was to reveal the hair. He went back to the bathroom where Sonia was collecting samples from the blood inside. He waited for her to finish. Till then, he tried to look up the name of Siya Rajput's mother. Her name came to him. *Naina Rajput*. He found the old case file in the central registry of all cases in the state of Maharashtra. Sonia walked out eventually.

Rathod said, 'Can you run tests on the hair and see who it belonged to? I can't help but feel that's crucial to this case. Also run everything you find, against all the evidence in Naina Rajput's case from sixteen years ago. I've sent you the case number.'

'Do you think there's a connection?'

'The bathroom looked exactly the same when she has disappeared,' Rathod said, showing Sonia a picture for the case file.

'I'll do that on priority,' Sonia said. 'I'll partially test the DNA on both so you can have the test results in the next hour.' She turned around and went back in.

'One more thing,' Rathod said. 'When are you going to conduct the luminol test?'

'We're almost done with the bathroom. So, let's say ten more minutes.'

Rathod returned to the room. He looked around to get a feel of the dead woman's life. The bedroom, like the house, was decorated with a lavish taste. It was big with distinct two sections. The first had a bed while the other had a dressing table, a study table, a book rack and two armchairs. A glass chandelier hung over the second section. There were abstract paintings on the walls. Every corner had a lamp. Large French windows lay in both sections.

Except for the dead woman and the blood in the bathroom, the house was clean. Rathod got even more curious to know which areas would light up blue in the luminol test.

'What sort of security is in place here?' Rathod said to Bhalerao.

'Nothing too sophisticated; what you'd find in most houses in this neighbourhood. There's a simple push and self-locking mechanism on the main door. The husband confirmed that they also put a padlock on the door from inside.'

‘What about the windows?’

‘All were closed barring the ones in this room.’

‘Ask the husband if it was normal for his wife to keep the windows open at night. It has got pretty cold over the last week.’

‘I will do that. I know the husband will be in shock, but I’ve told him we’ll come to his house to interrogate him tomorrow morning.’

Spare a thought for the guy. But he knew murder investigations were brutal. They could not afford to waste time, for if the husband was guilty, he was a threat to the society. Every murder tested the courage of police officers who were investigating it. Their first duty was towards the safety and well-being of the public. Everything else was secondary. So, he held back his tongue regarding the matter. ‘He was with his parents. He would’ve had an alibi, right?’ he said instead.

‘He does. Both his parents and kids vouch for his presence the entire day yesterday.’

Rathod walked out of the room. ‘Who found her?’ he said.

‘A friend from work. They were heading out for dinner. She’s downstairs right now. Her name is Sanjana Suman.’

Bhalerao guided him to a smaller living room apart from the main one. Inside, a woman, visibly shaken with smudged mascara and puffy eyes, was sitting on a large armchair. She was dressed well in an expensive looking floral dress.

Rathod went to the kitchen and got a glass of water. ‘Senior Inspector Kapil Rathod,’ he said, offering her the glass.

He sat on the armchair next to her. She nodded her head once and sipped the water. Rathod could make out her face relaxed a tad.

‘I know this is hard, Sanjana. But it’s important we talk to you as soon as possible,’ Rathod said. ‘Can you tell us about what happened earlier in the evening?’

Sanjana kept the glass on the side table. Her voice shivered when she spoke. ‘I was supposed to meet Supriya for dinner today. I came to her house to pick her up at eight thirty. I rang the bell and called her phone several times. She did not answer both. We were really looking forward to the night out. We had booked a table at our favourite restaurant. When she didn’t respond initially, I thought she might have stepped out to get something. But then I got worried. I knew her husband because everyone at work is like family. I called him. He was surprised. He tried her number as well but could not reach her. He was not afraid initially but after twenty minutes or so of trying, he panicked. He told me to get keys from their neighbours and go inside the house. I went in, called out to Supriya. But she still did not answer. Eventually, I went to her bedroom and found her on the bed. I thought she was sleeping but then I saw all the...’ her voice trailed off and she pressed her mouth with her hand to avoid breaking down.

Rathod let her take a moment.

‘Did you notice anything abnormal about the lock on the front door?’

Sanjana’s eyes wandered as she tried to remember. She shook her head.

‘How long have you known Supriya?’

‘It would have been five years in a week’s time. She was already working at Smart Tech when I joined.’

The name did not strike anything in Rathod’s mind. ‘What does Smart Tech do exactly?’

'We're into the Internet of Things. We make smart devices and wearables. We're heavily into research and development. Our products and services are used by big multinationals across the world. They either build their products on our platforms or use our technology in some way. You wouldn't have heard of us as we don't directly sell to customers, in most cases at least.'

'Where's this company located?'

'We have offices in Pune and Hyderabad. Pune is our research centre and Hyderabad is the corporate office. We also have a branch in San Francisco in Silicon Valley.'

'What was Supriya's role at Smart Tech?'

'She was the Lead Engineer. She joined Smart Tech when it was still small. I am a neural network scientist. I worked under her. We were supposed to head out and relax. We had a big product launch yesterday and we deserved some time off because the work that had gone into it was crazy.'

'Does the founder stay in Pune?'

'Yes,' Sanjana said. She rummaged in her purse and plucked out a card. 'That's him. Vivaan Deshpande.'

Rathod accepted the card. He made a mental note to meet Vivaan. He gauged Sanjana. She looked better as if speaking about the incident that had rattled her, had eased the burden of it. He held out his card and said, 'Sanjana, thanks for your time right now. We'll be in touch. Please call me if there's anything you think that'll be useful to our investigation.'

Rathod and Bhalerao returned upstairs.

'You're back on time,' Sonia said. 'We're prepping for the luminol test. We should start in two minutes.'

As promised, in the next two minutes, two crime scene analysts were drawing the curtains and closing the door to make the

room as dark as possible. They hung darkening curtains on the two windows as well the room and bathroom doors.

The room went pitch black. Sonia turned on a dim battery-operated light to guide her analysts as one began spraying luminol and the other was ready to photograph it using a long exposure camera. The concept of luminol was simple. Luminol reacted with the iron in the haemoglobin, the oxygen and iron-carrying protein in red blood cells. The moment it came in contact with anything containing iron, copper, cyanides or specific proteins, it glowed blue-green. It could detect one in a million part of trace blood.

The spraying began, starting from the wall next to the bed. They moved leftwards, inch by inch covering the area from floor to ceiling. The floor began to light up blue. The walls were clean. The floor lit blue uniformly. Not in patches and spurts, like the way it does usually with blood. Rathod was confused. They moved sideways, spraying the luminol. The entire floor was turned blue.

There was only one explanation. The floor had been cleaned with bleach. The oxidizing agent in bleach was reacting with the luminol. Bleach was used to wipe away all DNA evidence.

Then it happened.

In the second section of the room, the tiles stopped lighting up blue. A circular area had no luminol. The analysts went inside the circle and sprayed luminol in it. A pattern appeared. It was not a splatter. Instead, they were letters. They lit up one by one, left to right. Sonia indicated to her technician to focus on that area. More luminol was sprayed. All the letters were visible now. Silence resounded in the bedroom. Everyone was shocked to see what they were reading. The killer had left behind a message.

It read:

Hello again. There will be more.

P.S. - Tell Siya Rajput I said hi.

Chapter 6

I was about to blow the candles when my phone started ringing. It was on the table next to the cake. Its screen lit up. *Was someone calling to wish me for my birthday?*

I did not recognize the number. But instincts are not forgotten easily. Provide the right cue to the brain and even after years, neurons on a previously learnt pattern are fired, triggering the same thoughts and the same feelings. When my phone rang, I knew something was not right. I forgot about my birthday cake and answered the call.

The person across started speaking right away. I went cold. Even though I had not been able to recognize the number, I knew the voice far too well. One thing was certain. The person across the line was not calling me to say happy birthday.

And right then, I knew my wish for the new year was not going to come true.

‘Siya, are you there?’ the voice across the line said.

The voice belonged to Senior Inspector Kapil Rathod. I knew him from my time of practising law. He used to assist me in whatever way possible, often putting himself into jeopardy with the CID for helping out a criminal lawyer cum private detective. But we had a similar understanding of justice. Rathod was also my brother, Karan's, childhood friend. That's how I had reached out to him in the first place. I had not spoken to him in the past three years. I could not muster the courage to tell him that I had made a mistake.

‘Siya, hello?’ Rathod said again.

‘Yes, Rathod. I'm here.’ I felt a trepidation build inside me.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m at home.’

‘In Pune?’

I realized he would not have known anything about me since I left practice. ‘Yes, in Pune,’ I said.

‘I need to meet you.’ His voice was urgent.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s about your mother. There’s a new development in her case.’

I felt my heart beat in my head. Maa had gone missing sixteen years back. She was presumed dead by everyone. There was only a slim chance, a miracle almost, that she was still alive.

I said, ‘What? Is she...?’

Rathod cut in. ‘She’s alive.’

I shivered. My expression and demeanour must have changed drastically because Radha asked me with hand gestures about what was happening. I shook my head. I was too overwhelmed to say anything to her then.

‘At least she was twelve hours ago,’ Rathod said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can’t tell you over the phone about it.’

‘Meet me at the usual place in thirty minutes,’ I said, referring to the restaurant we used to meet to discuss the cases we worked on together.

‘The usual place? You’ve been gone for three years,’ Rathod said.

Silence.

‘Thirty minutes. Be there,’ I said and clicked off.

‘Who was it?’ Radha said.

‘Kapil Rathod. He’s a CID officer I used to discuss cases with,’ I said and paused. ‘He said this is about maa. He said she’s alive. Or at least was twelve hours ago.’

Radha’s face went white. Very few situations fazed her. Our mother was one of them. The second was our father. She regained her composure the next beat.

‘What does he mean by that?’ Radha said.

‘I don’t know. He wants to meet me.’

‘We’ll come with you,’ she said, taking a step for the door.

I could not say no. The truth was that I needed Radha at that moment. Just like I had needed her for the past three years. ‘Alright, let’s go,’ I said and grabbed my pullover from the hook behind the main door and tossed Radha her hoodie as Rahul slipped into his sweater.

We stepped out in the cold night. I could sense the life I was trying so hard to get away from was screaming my name out loud.

Chapter 7

Hope is dangerous to flirt with. We had gone through the pain of losing our parents too many times. Every time the doorbell rang, someone we did not recognize called out our name, we received a call from an unknown number, we felt someone's eyes in a crowded place or a lonely road, every time a reported missing person was found – we wished it was our mother returning to our lives. Each time we came close to believing they were alive. We had clung on to the hope of them coming back, however minuscule it may have seemed. But hope can be a bitch. We had become accustomed to not taking such calls at absolute value. But this time the bearer of the information was Kapil Rathod.

He was a man of integrity in a world that tempted him with corruption every day. Not only did the Pune CID have to deal with gruesome crimes from murders to rapes, but they had to work hard for a considerably lower pay than others, who worked the same or even less. Staying honest and turning down tempting bribes was hard for most. But Rathod had never fallen for it. Not even when his father had been diagnosed with Stage Three cancer and the medical bills had mounted.

I had first-hand experience of it when I was investigating a Bombay High Court judge for corruption. I had then worked with Kapil Rathod for the first time. Several cops were under the payroll of different mafias operating in the state. That was my first case out of law school under a lawyer named Santosh Wagh. He eventually went on to become my mentor and shaped much of my world belief.

After we exposed the HC judge, both the mafia and media were confused about who had conducted the investigation. We were doing everything from the shadows because even one wrong foot would have resulted in a bullet in our heads. To date, no one knew the people behind ibombayhcexpose2010@gmail.com. Even then, Kapil Rathod had not buckled under the threats that were made to his family—his old parents and three siblings.

When I eventually became a criminal lawyer seeking innocent clients and later a private detective, I knew I would get along with Rathod. It had been a decent ride. My work was often his release, especially when he felt hamstrung by the system.

As we drove to meet him, I realized I was once again delving into a world that had no compassion, where hellos were as common as curses and everyone held a knife under their *namastes*.

END OF SAMPLE

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