

The Nidhi Kapoor Story

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GRAPEVINE INDIA

Grapevine India Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Plot No.4, First Floor Pandav Nagar Opposite Shadipur Metro Station Patel Nagar New Delhi - 110008 India

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Printed and bound in New Delhi

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To,

*Ma, Pa, Sonali
Myra, Shilpa & Vivek
#sgMS*

Author's Note

In Sikhism, it is believed that humans are afflicted by five major weaknesses. Called the *panjados* or *panch vikar*, or more famously, five thieves, these are *Kaam* (lust), *Krodh* (anger), *Lobh* (greed), *Moh* (attachment) and *Hankaar* (ego). These five thieves cause obstruction in pursuit of moral and spiritual path of a devout Sikh. Hence it is the primary aim of a practicing Sikh to subdue these five inner evils and render them useless.

Remarkably, apart from Sikhism, these five evils, or the variants thereof, are talked about in almost all other early religions. Bible calls these seven deadly sins. In Buddhism, these are called *Kleshas*. In Hinduism, these are called *Doshas*. Jainism calls these *Kashayas*.

The Nidhi Kapoor Story is an attempt to explore these five thieves. Or if I may, five universal afflictions. The book is divided into five sub-books. Each sub-book talks about one thief and how that one thief guides emotions and decisions of the lead characters.

Finally, before you depart for the journey, along with Nidhi, Rujuta and Prakash, I want to thank you for deciding to read this book. As a first time author, it means a lot.

Thank you!

Saurabh Garg,
September 2014

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Book 1. Krodh

Krodh* is “...derived from the Sanskrit word Krodha, which means wrath or rage. It expresses itself several forms from silent sullenness to hysterical tantrums and violence.”

* Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krodh>

1. Sometime in the early 90s. Ronak.

Nishant Kapoor's majestic bungalow, Ronak, was the object of everyone's admiration and envy. Not just because it was grander than any other, or because it was located on probably the most prized nook of Mumbai, but because it was a symbol. Of power, wealth and fame. A symbol that one had to earn the hard way; the way Nishant Kapoor had. In fact, it was his very presence that made Ronak the symbol it was. After all, when he came to Mumbai from his dusty nondescript village in Punjab, all Nishant got along was his dream of becoming a Bollywood star. And a piece of paper with the address of a distant relative who had once made vague promises to help. Now, almost twenty years after he first set his foot inside a film studio – he started his career as an extra in a wasteful wedding scene – Nishant Kapoor was the undisputed king of Bollywood.

Bollywood fuels dreams of millions of Indians who throng dark cinema halls to escape from their tough lives in the bright world outside. It is an escape into a glossy, cheery, fantasy world of movies and film stars where everything is picture-perfect and almost every story has a they-lived-happily-ever-after ending.

Tonight, the lavish house dominating the far corner of busy Parulekar Road and quiet Alfred Creadon Lane, was hosting a party. The party was the talk of the town, for it had been almost three long years since the last gathering at Ronak. There had been no reason to throw parties, as after nearly two decades of dominance over the film industry, nothing seemed to be working for the great Nishant Kapoor lately. Except *Lahu Ka Rang*.

The movie had come at a point when everyone had almost written Nishant Kapoor off. He was ageing and despite his long and illustrious career, he was on a fast road downhill. *Lahu Ka Rang* came out of nowhere and had reinforced Nishant's supremacy as the leading actor of Bollywood. Critics, fans, friends, enemies, media and everyone else who had anything to do with the business of entertainment, were of the opinion that Nishant Kapoor had given his best performance. Ever.

Surprisingly, unlike all his previous movies that were about love, romance, family sagas or tragedy, *Lahu Ka Rang* was an out-and-out action flick; his first ever in more than twenty years since his blockbuster debut in *Pyar Ka Musafir*.

Nishant knew that he was taking a huge risk in signing the movie. He had never done an action flick before. He was too old to perform complex stunts that the script demanded. The leading actress opposite him was a newcomer, fifteen years younger and too inexperienced to pull off long dialogues that were important for the climax scene of the movie. The production banner, though belonged to a veteran, had clearly seen better times. When the banner was strong, they had never approached Nishant. And the younger Nishant was too arrogant to approach someone for work.

Although Nishant was reluctant, *Lahu Ka Rang* was his only choice. His older movies were now fading from public memory and new offers were getting harder to come by. Messages and mail from his loyal fans that almost choked up his mailbox once upon a time, was now reduced to a trickle. The relentless crowd outside Ronak had thinned considerably and now consisted mostly of curious tourists who considered Ronak yet another landmark in the city of dreams. Otherwise every Sunday, precisely at noon, when he came out on the first floor terrace of Ronak to wave at the crowd gathered for his *darshan*, all he could see from his vantage point was a sea of humanity; mostly young women who considered Nishant Kapoor the answer to their fervent prayers for a Prince Charming riding on horseback.

Even though they did not use any out-of-city locations, the shoot took almost a year to complete. The year was full of anxiousness and agony for Nishant. What if the movie did not do well? What if the audience did not accept him as an action hero? What if the heroine could not deliver? What if she did deliver and got more eyeballs than him? What if the distributors backed out? What would he do if the movie bombed? How could Nishant Kapoor fade away into obscurity?

Lahu Ka Rang took its time to release. Just before the release, the censor board put an objection to steamy love scenes between Nishant and Preeti. When they edited those scenes out, one of the largest distributors got into an argument with the producer and refused to release the prints. But despite the roadblocks and delays, the movie did come out and surprised everyone with the reception it got. Including Nishant.

The first few days were slow; theaters were running empty shows and Nishant's greatest fears almost came true. The producer, Roshan Taluja, surprisingly remained upbeat and kept telling Nishant to remain patient. And then, as if someone had cast a magic spell on them, the first set of people who saw the movie – most of them were ardent Nishant Kapoor fans – started to come back. To watch the movie second, third, even the fourth time. And they got along their friends and family. They talked to everyone they could about its brilliance and how the movie ought not be missed. And like wildfire, suddenly, everyone was talking about the film.

After the first few disappointing days, all shows of *Lahu Ka Rang* ran houseful. For weeks. It eventually went on to celebrate a Golden Jubilee at the box office. The first for Nishant Kapoor after long, long drought.

The film swept the Filmfare Awards and Nishant won awards for the roles of best actor and best villain, for he had played a double role in the film. This was the first such instance where the same actor won the two most coveted awards in the same year, for the same movie. There were talks of translating the film in foreign languages and releasing it overseas. It was even declared as India's official entry for the Academy Awards and everyone was sure about its success on the global forum. *Lahu Ka Rang* had recreated the Nishant Kapoor that everyone had known over the years – bright, loud, colorful, successful and full of himself.

Bineet Majumdar, the prominent film critic known for his merciless and scathing attacks on any cinema that was not up to his apparently high standards, wrote in his weekly column at Maha Sakaal, "...Nishant Kapoor has been unfair to his fans to not have done an action film all his life. This is a new, better and a mature reincarnation of the great Nishant Kapoor. A version that would remain etched in our memories forever. With *Lahu Ka Rang*, Nishant has made himself immortal and a living legend."

Since Bineet Majumdar was indifferent to any form of coercion, bribe, lure or gifts, his reviews were taken more seriously than priests making zealous religious sermons. When the review came out everyone around Nishant compelled him into throwing a bash. The first person to receive an invitation was Bineet Majumdar. As expected, he refused to acknowledge the invitation.

Thankfully Majumdar did not attend the party. Because if he had, his account of events that were to unfold at the party would have shattered the reputation that was so dear to Nishant Kapoor.

* * *

Ronak was decked up like a new bride. Fancy lights outlined the two-storied structure. The grand lawn was bathed in color and opulence. The swimming pool was illuminated with disco lights that changed colors with music. A DJ was set up at the far corner, next to the bar, and was belting out famous dance numbers from Nishant Kapoor's movies. Appropriate permissions had been taken, generous bribes had changed hands and Nishant had gone over the guest list with a fine comb.

Everyone of any importance in the film industry made an appearance. So did the prominent businessmen, high-ranking politicians and socialites. The Chief Minister was expected to attend as well. Nishant Kapoor was back in the game and it was time to resurrect old friendships and secure his attention. More importantly, secure his dates.

"These politicians are always late!" exclaimed Nishant. Preeti, the first time actress and the heroine of the film, was hanging precariously on Nishant's arm. She was wearing a long white wraparound dress that extended from her shoulders to the ankles. The outrageously loud, body hugging one-piece dress accentuated her shapely figure. The dress had a long slit on the left that started at the ankles and went as far up as her slender waistline. On the left shoulder was a large red flower. She wore a deep red lipstick matching the flower.

From a nobody, Preeti had catapulted to the very top of the fiercely competitive world with *Lahu Rang*. She was an enigma to everyone around her. She had no connections to boast of and no godfathers whom she could ask for help. She rather had something rustic, something primal about her. Unlike most other newcomers that were tentative and insecure, she had no inhibitions.

"Yeah? If it were his party, I bet you would have been the last to arrive and probably the first to leave," Roshan Taluja said.

Nishant laughed energetically. "Right, Roshan. In this country, we judge the importance of a man by two things. One, how late could he arrive at a function and keep everyone waiting. Two, once he has arrived, how soon can he excuse himself out of there." The three of them laughed. So did other people standing around them. The loudest was Preeti, who seemed to be really enjoying the conversation. Her antics in Nishant Kapoor's presence did not go unnoticed. Even Neelima, Nishant's wife, could hear Preeti's loud shrills from afar.

Neelima was an actress herself before she and Nishant got married. Since then, Neelima had accepted the role of a mere homemaker while Nishant went out and earned his fame and fortune. At the party, while Nishant was entertaining guests with his natural charm and wit, Neelima and their daughters – Payal and Nidhi – were exchanging pleasantries with other guests.

Payal, nineteen, had sharp features and deep set dimples that went deeper when she smiled. Her eyes were bright and full of life. She had the spring of a hyperactive child in her stride and the magnetism of a livewire that made her the center of attraction wherever she went. Just like Nishant.

Nidhi, seventeen, was comparatively muted and reserved. Despite her silent countenance, she seemed to have inherited the best features of both her parents. Her deep eyes and perfect jawline came from her mother, her fine complexion from her father. She had a coy smile that intrigued everyone enough to want to talk to her.

If the gossip magazines were to be believed, even though Payal was the adopted child, Nishant Kapoor wanted her to carry his legacy forward. An army of trainers had already been hired to groom her for dance, theatre, diction and fitness. Payal seemed enthusiastic about the idea and put in requisite time and effort. She reveled when she moved around in the film circles.

Despite inheriting the regal looks of her parents, Nidhi on the other hand, had shown no inclination towards the film business. She, in fact, hated the *filmwallahs* and such parties. She was present only at the insistence of her mother. Her idea of fun hovered around books and photography, two disciplines that required immense amount of tolerance and patience.

It was now that time of the party when the monotony of conversation takes over gossip and guests start grooving to the music. Today, Preeti started the dancing furor. Since she was a newly crowned celebrity, she did not know the protocol and dragged a surprised Vicky Taluja, son of Roshan Taluja, to the dance floor. Vicky was an Assistant Director and had assisted his father with *Lahu Ka Rang's* production. He was a newcomer himself and when Preeti started dancing with him, a few guests raised eyebrows. There were silent murmurs and glances in Nishant's direction.

Nishant had taken a liking for Preeti, the way he did for all other newcomers. No one felt odd about it, for everyone knew of Nishant's avarice for good-looking women. Even if they were unknown and anonymous, Nishant met them with as much warmth and affection as one would expect him to reserve for his wife.

Preeti was dancing dangerously close to Vicky. Despite his father's reputation, he was just an AD and was clearly uncomfortable with so many seniors from the industry staring at him. He had lived his life under his father's wings and was clearly not used to the limelight. Nishant noticed everyone staring at Preeti and though he did not want to intervene while Neelima was around, he felt he ought to protect her. He wasn't really afraid of his wife but he did not want any ugly confrontation.

While the excruciating seconds ticked away, Preeti got bolder with her moves and Vicky got more uncomfortable. Nishant tried to ignore but could not tolerate it any longer. He went on the dance floor and like a gentleman, bent on one knee and asked Preeti for a dance. Before Preeti could even accept the invitation, Vicky excused himself and rushed to the bar. Preeti giggled like a fifteen-year-old. She moved towards Nishant, extended her bare leg sensuously and rested it on Nishant's bent knee. Nishant caressed it and got to his feet. He held onto Preeti's tiny waist in his strong grip.

Before the crowd could digest the suggestive real-life steamy scene playing on the dance floor, the DJ played one of the most famous Nishant Kapoor dance songs. Preeti ran her hand through Nishant's thick wavy hair and started to groove to the music. Nishant followed her moves and soon they were gyrating to the music. Nishant had embraced Preeti into a hug and his hands were rested comfortably on the small of Preeti's back. Her head was leaning on Nishant's shoulder and she was apparently whispering something into his ears.

Neelima had known, tolerated and ignored Nishant's escapades for well over twenty years now. Most of these encounters happened behind closed doors. But this open display of debauchery in the presence of her daughters and the entire industry made her furious.

Nishant had his back towards Neelima, unaware of his wife's seething anger. Preeti could see Neelima, but she remained unperturbed. To make matters worse, Preeti curled her lips into a contemptuous smile and sneered at Neelima. Neelima could not endure it anymore and started to walk towards the dance floor. Nidhi clutched at her mother's arm and tried unsuccessfully to stop her.

Neelima tugged at Nishant's shoulder and broke the unnaturally long cuddle that Preeti and Nishant were in. Without Nishant's strong frame to shadow her, Preeti seemed tiny, fragile and vulnerable. Neelima, on the other hand, looked like a reincarnation of Devi herself. She was breathing heavily, her jaws were clenched and her body trembled from rage pent up inside her.

Preeti looked at Nishant helplessly. She extended her arm towards Nishant, seeking his support, his embrace. Nishant was however, hesitant. He was put on spot. He suddenly had to choose between his wife of twenty years and a young starlet. Neelima, the faithful wife, saved Nishant from embarrassment yet again. Before he could react, Neelima caught Preeti's arm and slapped her hard with all her might.

The blow was too much for a frail Preeti. She fell down in a heap. Just like in films, things came to a standstill. As if on cue, the DJ stopped the music. Glasses were left hanging in mid-air, mouths were left gaping and the laughter around the party died. The rasp sound of a powerful slap floated above the din of the party.

Neelima was shivering with rage and the adrenaline rush. She was breathing hard and glared at Preeti, who was still motionless on the floor. Everyone was dumbfounded and no one knew what to do.

Guests looked at Nishant for a suitable reaction. Even the two daughters were looking hopefully at their father for some signs of reconciliation, efforts to bring peace and truce. Preeti's face had reddened and her upper lip was beginning to swell. She had tears in her eyes and she crawled imperceptibly towards Nishant. Nishant, as if he woke from a deep slumber, yelled in his booming voice, "How dare you, Neelima?"

And then, without any warning, Nishant slapped Neelima. Hard.

He slapped his wife of almost twenty years. The mother of his two daughters. His companion through thick and thin. A woman often credited as the hidden force behind Nishant's success. An upcoming actress who let go of her dreams to look after Nishant's household.

Nishant's punch landed on Neelima's nose and cheeks with a smack. It ruptured the blood vessels on her nose and a faint red trickle ran down her nose.

Surprisingly, Neelima did not balk. She just stumbled backwards and immediately found her ground. She remained defiant and there was no trace of fear in her eyes. Nor did she shed any tears. Her face did not give away her emotions, but her cheeks were beginning to puff up and blood was running down faster and thicker than before.

Payal and Nidhi saw their home tearing apart into shambles with that one blow. They rushed towards their parents. Payal was the first to reach Nishant. Her eyes were moist and she was looking at Nishant tenderly. She held Nishant's hand and started massaging it slowly.

Meanwhile, Nidhi was trying to support Neelima. But Neelima stood her ground firmly. She nodded at Nidhi, waved her away and looked straight into Nishant's eyes. "Will that be all, Nishant?" she said in an unwavering, confident voice.

Nishant was enraged at this open display of insubordination. Before anyone could react, he started pelting Neelima with blows. He was oblivious to where his blows landed, what bones he broke, what marks he left on her tender body. When Neelima fell down from the nonstop assault, he began to kick her. He did not see blood or tears. He did not hear screams and gasps of other women present at the party. He did not register the shock on the faces of other men. He did not see his wife dying with each blow that he delivered to her. He did not see his home getting dismantled, the foundations uprooting, with every grunt that escaped his throat when he hit his wife. He did not see anything. He could not. He could merely see himself. And Neelima. A woman who had refused to balk when he asked her to. What if she was his wife?

Surprisingly, no one had the courage to intervene. With the indifference that Neelima accepted these blows, they realized that this was not the first time that Nishant was hitting Neelima. Payal was crying incessantly all this while. She had hidden her face in Nidhi's arms. Nidhi, on the other hand, was quiet and resolute. Her eyes were stoned, as if she was hypnotized. She was staring at her father beating her mother. And then something snapped inside her. She flung Payal away from her, wailed and threw herself at Nishant. Nishant didn't see her coming and both of them fell down from the impact. Nidhi, with surprising agility, climbed up on him and pinned him down to the floor with her knees.

"Enough, papa. One more move and you are dead," she growled.

2. Day 1, Morning. Police Station.

It began like any other day in the office for Prakash Mohile. As the Assistant Commissioner of Police with the Special Crimes Division of Mumbai Police, his job was a tough one. For a city that more than two crore people call home, Mumbai had a very small police force of just about 49000, divided into 89 stations. With all the VIPs, film stars, politicians and industrialists who demanded constant protection from threats, legit or otherwise, the police force was always understaffed and overworked.

Amongst all myriad responsibilities that Prakash was entrusted with, he was also in-charge of protection for the film fraternity. And he hated it. Not the job per se, but the tantrums and shenanigans of the very people he was supposed to guard. He did not have time for jests, humor and other such light-hearted human emotions. His only commitment was to the department. His only passion was to do his job well. His only escape was a ride on his Bullet and a few rounds of Jack Daniel.

Today, like most mornings, he was leafing through case files from the previous evening, hearing of the mercy pleas of kin of miscellaneous men arrested yesterday and barking instructions at his juniors for the day ahead, all at the same time. Not for a minute did he look in the direction of Rujuta Singh, freelance photojournalist attached to him for a month-long assignment. Rujuta was doing a photo-essay on Mumbai police for an international publication and though Mohile did not appreciate anyone interfering with his work, Rujuta was put in his command by the city Mayor. Even though she was young, good-looking and intelligent, Prakash considered Rujuta more of a nuisance than anything else.

Most cases today were drab as usual. The same set of extortion calls, thefts, road accidents, celebrity altercations, and other petty crimes. By the time policemen spend five or so years in the service, they become indifferent to these miseries around them. Not Prakash. He had been in service for more than ten years. Every morning while allocating cases to his subordinates, he would ponder on the meaning of life and unnecessary grief caused by these avoidable crimes. He was thus most sympathetic to the issues of poor and helpless, and most indifferent to the miseries of the rich. He would allocate cases of the fanciest film star to the worst in his team and work personally on the case of anonymous men and women who were barely making it through the tough city of Mumbai.

When he kept a very high profile case for himself, his staff was surprised. Even Rujuta took note of it, now that she had been shadowing Prakash for almost two weeks and thus was somewhat aware of his style of working.

“So, Mohile Saab, finally you found a case worthy of your time? You are finally going to chase limelight now with this stupid thing at Nidhi Kapoor’s house?” Rujuta sneered, stuffing her things hastily in her bag. She knew that once Prakash did the case allocations, he wanted every policeman on the field pronto. No one but Rujuta could’ve asked this question since she was the only one at the police station who did not subscribe to either fear or respect for Prakash. And she was anyway known to speak her mind. Often, and with conviction.

Prakash looked up at Rujuta, gave her his trademark smirk and went back to his files. That smirk had an infamous reputation. Prakash used it when he knew he was right and the other person, wrong. For suspects and criminals, it meant that Prakash had called their bluff and they were now in his bad books. For his subordinates, the smirk meant that they hadn’t done their homework well. For people who did not know Prakash, it just came across as a silly smile of a bald police officer. Since Rujuta was relatively new, she thought that Prakash was bemused at something that she had said.

She could not tolerate getting dismissed like that. She egged on, “I know you like her. Weren’t you part of Nidhi’s security detail when the premier of her last film was screened for the Chief Minister? There were quite a few pictures of you with her and the CM in the newspapers. You seem to have a soft corner for her!”

“Stop wasting your time. If you want to come along, you better hurry up,” Prakash replied curtly.

He had finished signing the documents and was on his way out. Rujuta had to run to catch up with him. He had already fired up the engine. He drove his official jeep by himself. The driver was merely a watchdog and usher.

As they crossed the Juhu Tara Road bordering the Juhu Beach, Rujuta tried her luck once again. “Prakash Sir, we must come here sometime in the evening. I’ve heard the *Pav Bhaji* is to die for,” she said.

The two constables in the jeep and the driver giggled softly at the overt public display of affection. Prakash stared at them. All three of them shut their mouths immediately. Rujuta was quite amused with the scene. She smiled and started looking at people milling around on the beach. She wondered why would someone come to a beach at eleven in the morning. Didn’t they have better things to do? Were they jobless? Her thoughts slowly drifted towards Prakash and the last couple of weeks that she had spent with him.

Prakash was one of the most extraordinary men that she had come across. He was always upright and was an epitome of fairness. Rujuta pictured Prakash as a school kid who would oil his hair with such perfection that not one strand was out of place, trim his nails so deep that not a speck of dust remained stuck in the tiny crevices, polish his shoes so meticulously that he could see his reflection in them, complete his homework well on time, sit on the first bench to please the teachers and keep his eyes shut during the entire morning assembly at school. Rujuta smiled at the picture of a young Prakash that she had just painted. She realized that she had been a polar-opposite as a kid. Maybe that’s why she was so intrigued by him. She had a maddening craving for Prakash. She knew that Prakash was aware of her yearning for him and yet chose to remain elusive.

The jeep came to a halt with a jerk and Rujuta was almost thrown out of it. Prakash’s reflexes kicked in and he caught her deftly. His masculine touch on her bare arms sent goose bumps down her spine.

“Next time, you better sit in the back,” Prakash said as he got down from the jeep. To Rujuta, it sounded like an instruction from her school principal. The constables had alighted by then and were already walking towards the massive front entrance of Ronak.

Nidhi Kapoor was now a film star herself and her success had eclipsed even Nishant’s. She shot to fame a few years ago when Nishant retired and since then, she had ruled the hearts and box offices like no other actress had. Just like Nishant had in his time.

The guards on duty at Ronak were more alert than usual. Normally they would be sprawled on their chairs, resting under an umbrella and would be sipping their sugary teas. Today, they were standing in a tight formation and had made a ring outside the main entrance. Their guns, which normally remained out of sight, were displayed in full glory today.

To admit Prakash, Rujuta and Tambe, the heavy gate opened just a wee bit with a lazy moan, as if a tiny crack had appeared in it. Once they had slid inside, the crack in the formidable iron and wood structure closed behind them, faster and tighter than ever. The whining moan was typical of the old, rusted gate that remained closed more often than it was kept open.

After the commotion on the road outside, the inside of the bungalow felt unusually serene. Prakash noticed the noise reduction barriers installed on top of the periphery of the large house. In the lawn, a middle-aged man was pacing frantically around the chairs and an umbrella. When he saw Prakash and his entourage, he hurried towards them.

“Hello Inspector... Mohile,” he said, eyeing Prakash’s name badge. He got Prakash’s designation wrong but Prakash ignored it. He continued, “I am Naveen Verma. Nidhi’s uncle. I spoke to Joshi Saab in the morning. Thank you so much for coming at this short notice. Joshi Saab couldn’t make it? I was expecting him, you know...”

Shankar Rao Joshi was the commissioner of police and he had instructed his office to give this case to Prakash Mohile. He had then called Prakash himself in the morning. Of all officers at his disposal, Joshi knew that Prakash was least likely to get influenced by the high-profile nature of the case and would do a thorough investigation.

Prakash interrupted Verma. “Mr. Verma, Joshi Saab may not have time to go on wild goose chases like this. He’s instructed me to visit you personally and here I am. Otherwise even I have other pressing matters to worry about. Can you show us the crime site please?” Prakash was peeved by Verma’s demand to see the commissioner.

“How dare you talk to me... And who is she? I clearly told Joshi Saab, no photographers!” Verma pointed at Rujuta and her camera. Rujuta had taken her camera out and was trying to take an artistic shot of the white wooden chairs resting against the green backdrop of the neatly kept lawn.

“She is a part of my team and will be here while I am here. She will not click any more photographs...” Prakash replied curtly and motioned to Rujuta to put her camera away. “But she will stay. If you are fine with it, we can stay and meet Ms. Nidhi. If not, we can go back to the station and you could wait for Mr. Joshi to come and see you.”

“I don’t believe...” Verma started to argue, but then thought better of it. He walked towards the house. “Nidhi is in her room. Let’s go there.”

“I’d rather see the crime scene first please,” Prakash replied.

Verma paused, nodded silently and led them inside.

The house was an impressive two-storied structure. As Prakash, Rujuta and his team started to follow Naveen Verma inside, Prakash nodded at one of the constables. He got his cue and understood that he was to go to the entrance and chat up with security guards and get some gossip out from them under the pretext of cigarette and tea.

“Who else lives in this house Mr. Verma?” Prakash enquired.

“Here? Nidhi, her sister Payal and two servants. That’s about it. I live in a building in the next lane. I come and go as and when Nidhi needs me. Nishant now lives at a clinic in Panchgani but we have decided to get him back to Ronak as a precaution,” Verma replied.

Nishant Kapoor, the superstar of the yesteryears, was now confined to a rehab facility in the hills of Panchgani, some 250 KMs away from Mumbai. He had had an accident that left him paralyzed and there were rumors about his mental condition. Neelima, his wife, was long dead. Naveen Verma was Neelima’s brother and had been managing the business of Kapoors since Neelima and Nishant got married.

“What about those guards at the main entrance? What about the gardeners? Maids? Supplies?”

“The guards do not live here. We’ve hired a security agency and four guards work in 6-hour shifts. So, a total of 24 guards. There is a room for security guards towards the end of the lawn. They use that room for wash and change,” Verma said, pointing a finger at a small room on the far end of the house.

“There is no gardener. Payal manages the lawns with the help of Malti, the maid. For the supplies, Malti makes a list and gives it to one of the security guards. We’ve kept life simple because Nidhi likes it like that. And of course it helps control the gossip.”

Rujuta thought Verma was volunteering information by himself. Either it was not the first time that he was talking to police, or his lines were rehearsed. She made a mental note of it.

Prakash whistled and said to no one in particular, “24 guards? For one woman? And when she’s not even home most of the time! Why are we wasting our time here Tambe?”

Tambe knew that he was not supposed to react. This was how Prakash worked. He would incite and incite till the other person rolled over the edge and started to talk.

Verma, as if he did not hear Prakash, kept talking. “Nidhi is a big big star. She has her share of stalkers, obsessed fans and enemies. We have to be very cautious. We invite very few people to Rona and the ones we do invite are all close friends or business associates. We don’t conduct our meetings here. We no longer throw gaudy parties like Nishant used to. We have cameras, biometric access system and trip alarms installed in the house. Nidhi and Payal’s security is number one agenda for us. Everything else is secondary. It’s inexplicable how this could happen despite the precautions we take!”

Verma had talked for a large part of the walk to the main building of the house. Though he looked fit, he was almost out of breath by the time they reached the main building. He put his thumb on an electronic scan pad, entered a string of numbers and the door opened with a beep. “Please come in,” he said.

The house had been done up beautifully. Nidhi Kapoor was obviously rich and had a fine taste. The reception hall, or the drawing room, was rather large for Mumbai standards, with a grand chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Rujuta frowned at it. She thought chandeliers were a thing of the past and nobody owned them anymore.

Each wall of the house told a different story. The wall on their left was pale blue and lined with photos of the great Nishant Kapoor. It was like a viewing gallery celebrating his life. The right wall was where Nidhi Kapoor showcased art and pictures from famous artists. It also had life-size posters of old movies, from the time when posters were actually sketched and colored by hands.

Along the wall on a tall shelf were a bundle of trophies that Nishant, or maybe Nidhi, had won. Most prominently placed was a Golden Filmfare trophy. If Rujuta had known that the trophy was made in gold just once since the inception of awards in 1954, she would have spent more time reading the citation.

There was a sofa underneath the chandelier that could seat a mini procession and yet leave room for more. The tables behind the sofa had curios, apparently gathered from all parts of the world. It was an eclectic mix of handicraft, crystals, coffee table books and other trinkets.

The whole place had a sense of symmetry to it, like someone had used a ruler to put it all together with great care. While she was wondering about the meticulous brain that had designed the hall, she realized that she was alone. She saw Tambe’s back disappearing behind an open door on the left at the far end of the hall. Not wanting to miss out on anything, she scampered towards it.

She rushed into the room and stepped onto something sticky on the floor. She looked down at it and froze in her tracks. Her eyes opened wide with shock and horror.

She gasped out loud and covered her mouth with her hands to suppress the shriek. She instead belched silently and started to shake violently. With great difficulty, she took a step back and grabbed the door to prevent herself from falling like a heap of potatoes. She was breathing hard and drops of sweat appeared on her forehead.

Rujuta was not weak-hearted. She had seen her share of gory crime scenes as a criminal photojournalist and had earned the reputation for having guts of steel. Crime scenes that made the most experienced of policemen empty their stomachs out on the sidewalks; she worked those as if she were strolling in a park. But it was a different lifetime and she was not really prepared for what was unfolding in front of her eyes, in what looked like the office of the most successful actress of the time, Nidhi Kapoor. The daughter of the great Nishant Kapoor.

3. Day 1, Afternoon. Ronak.

Prakash observed that the office was rather small compared to the grandeur of the living room that they had just crossed. An impressive teak writing table was placed opposite a giant window with lilac chiffon curtains on it. A shiny iMac was resting on the table. Surprisingly, the table also had an old Remington perched on the far end. Next to it, a pen stand housed immaculately sharpened pencils. On the other edge of the table, a few loose sheets of paper were fluttering under the waft of air from the air-conditioner above it. The picture-perfect setting for a writer was so real that Prakash imagined someone walking up to the desk any minute and start working on the next bestseller.

The wall to his left had a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf filled methodically with books, mostly on film, television and other such titles that people merely collect to show off and not read. The bookcase was designed like the ones in large public libraries and it reminded him of the time when he worked as a handy-boy at a teashop and had to ferry cups of tea up and down the giant stairs of the Asiatic Library at the Town Hall.

On the other side of the writing table, to Prakash's right, was a bright yellow couch, big enough to be a makeshift bed when required. A huge gramophone and an envious collection of vinyl records, stacked as neatly and orderly as the books in the bookshelf, rested in the corner bordered by the writing table and the yellow couch.

An oval rug was placed on the floor between the door and the teakwood desk. It occupied most of the empty space on the floor. It extended from the table to the door vertically and covered half the width of the room horizontally. It looked like an expensive piece of accessory but was now soaked with blood. Rujuta, when she entered the room behind Prakash and Tambe in a hurry, had stepped on this blood-smear rug.

On the rug, a mangled mass of flesh and bone had been left in a heap. Rujuta could make out that it was two dogs and a cat. Rigor mortis had set in and the dead bodies were twisted in strange shapes. It was evident that the murderer had used these poor animals as a canvas to show off his skills as a messenger of death.

A pug, that probably suffered the least when it was killed, had its neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Its eyes were still open and had almost popped out of the sockets. A complex latticework of red and blue veins on the white pupils was staring out. Rujuta had first looked at these bulging eyes when she came in. Its jaw was open and an almost severed part of the tongue was hanging lifelessly from the open mouth.

The other animal, a bulldog, seemed to have gone through the worst punishment. Multiple stab wounds punctured its body and one of the pencils from the desk was stuck into its face, right below one of the eyes. The skin around each stab wound was swollen and blood had dried around the stabs. Each stab was like a mini volcano that spurt out thick chunks of blood. It was hard to image that a mere pencil could inflict such deep wounds. One of its legs was amputated and a mangled bone stuck out of it.

The cat had deep gashes on its shoulders. Its white fur had turned red and its head had split open to reveal pinkish mass beneath the white and grey lumps of hair.

Dead bodies of these animals, or whatever remained of them, were stacked together in a heap of flesh and bones, gathered carelessly in a big puddle of blood on the rug.

Rujuta had almost slumped on the floor. Prakash, Tambe and Verma seemed to be faring better. Prakash squatted next to the dead bodies and was peering at the pencil stuck in the face of the bulldog. Tambe stood attentively next to a wall. Verma shuffled uncomfortably near the entrance of the room, trying not to look at the mess in front of him.

Rujuta was probably so disturbed because she was not mentally prepared to scout through a crime scene. An hour ago, she was making plans of going out with Prakash and now she was now face to face with a gory crime scene. She spared a thought for her own cat, Felix, at home. Felix was her only constant companion. Since she was young, very attractive and on the fast track to being successful, she had no dearth of suitors. But for some reason she kept everyone at bay. She did have a few men that she used as accessories, tools, toys and playboys. She would often get sloshed with her Jing bang and get one of them back home for the night. She probably wanted a similar arrangement with Prakash, but right now, she could not think of anything but the pets. Her gaze was fixed onto the heap of dead bodies and she seemed to have lost her speech. Tambe, when he saw her slump, had rushed to help her but Prakash had stopped him from doing so.

When Prakash was done looking at the dead bodies, he asked Naveen Verma, “When did you discover this?”

Verma’s discomfort was heightened by Prakash’s indifference and Rujuta’s trauma. “I don’t know. We found this...” he paused, pointed ambiguously in the middle of the room, gulped and continued, “this morning when Nidhi came into her office. Poor girl is still in shock. Cho, Caesar and Cookie meant the world to us. Nidhi and Payal took care of them as if they were their children.”

Prakash glanced at Tambe and turned back to Verma. “No one at the house saw or heard anything? The security guards? If someone had to kill these animals, they had to have access to the house. And don’t dogs and cats make a lot of noise? There is no way someone mutilated these animals without anyone hearing a thing,” Prakash said.

Verma was surprised at this rambling of Prakash. Tambe however, knew that Prakash was merely talking to himself. He and Prakash had been working together since Tambe moved to Mumbai from Satara, another district in Maharashtra. Tambe had been a beat constable before his promotion and transfer four years ago.

Verma eventually answered, “These were very friendly dogs. They did not bark even if you took their food away. They have been... had been with us for a long time and Payal had trained them herself.”

“Mr. Verma, I asked if someone saw or heard something,” Prakash said curtly. He apparently had no time for Verma’s pointless rant.

Verma started to say something but Prakash interrupted him. Prakash knew he was pushing his luck but he wanted to ascertain if Naveen Verma knew more than he was telling. It had to be an insider. There was no way someone from outside could do this. He shot another arrow in the dark. “Do you have more pets in the house? Did you speak with the guards?”

Or maybe it was an outsider. How hard could it be for someone with enough motivation to climb the wall and get into the study? The pets would have noticed the movement and they would’ve got excited. The crime scene made Prakash wary and he was unsure about the modus operandi. It looked like a planned assault, executed methodically in cold blood. If it was indeed an outsider, he had access to the bungalow and even the main residential building. He had come in, done the barbaric job and left without getting noticed. All this at Ronak, one of the most watched houses in the country.

“No. No. I haven’t had time to speak with anyone. Nidhi discovered this... mess and then all hell broke loose. Even Payal was hysterical. Both of them are in Nidhi’s bedroom upstairs,” Verma said. Prakash was looking around the room but he hung onto every word that Verma spewed. He had an eidetic memory and he could remember conversations, words, scenes, clothes, smells and other things from the crime scene for a long time.

Prakash walked to the writing table. “Hmm... OK. I want to talk to every member of the house, including the servants. I want to spend some time here by myself. Please wait for me outside till then.”

He continued, “Tambe, take Rujuta madam out of the room and get her some water or something.”

Both these statements were more like orders rather than requests. Tambe was used to these but Naveen Verma wasn’t. He wanted to revolt but had no energy left to do so. He did not want to be in the room with the dead bodies anyway. Verma started to walk out and paused momentarily when he saw Rujuta wilted outside. “You know, this is exactly how I found Nidhi, right here by the door,” he said and without waiting for an answer, sidestepped Rujuta and walked out.

* * *

The moment Verma was out of sight, Tambe muttered, “Sir, something is wrong. This Verma guy not as worried as he’s trying to appear. But who would kill these poor animals? They had a far far better life than most of us. They live in air-conditioned rooms with enough food to feed five families and access to doctors that take more money for each visit than we spend on medicines in our entire lives.”

Tambe always had an opinion on everything. And most of those opinions would conform to an average Mumbaikar’s. He was in that sense, the voice of the city.

“And this is why someone killed them. Maybe you did. Did you? You clearly are jealous of them,” Prakash barked. As much he liked Tambe and his opinions, he hated interruptions while he was working a case.

Tambe realized he had irked Prakash. He bowed and quietly headed towards the door to tend to Rujuta who was still visibly distressed.

Prakash worked like that on most of his cases. He’d take one long, hard look at the crime scene to acquaint himself with it. Then he would talk to everyone who could have had anything to do with the victim or the crime scene. He would then let everything simmer in his head and wait for the dots to connect. Every new piece of evidence added another layer of connection between the dots and he kept on breaking and making these connections until he cracked the case. He believed that most crimes had a clear motive and more often than not someone connected with the victim was the key.

Although he never took notes, somehow the answers almost always dawned onto him, even in seemingly impossible cases. His repertoire of successful cases included confiscation of a large stash of illicit drugs and a famous hit-and-run by the son of a leading industrialist. In both these cases, the police did not have any substantial clues. In the drug bust, he just had an incoherent account from a junkie and tyre marks on a dirt track of a dusty road. In the hit-and-run, he had a grainy footage from CCTV and a sleepy guard manning an ATM.

Prakash was always called in when cases seemed too complex for the police force to handle. He was amongst the best officers of Mumbai police but nothing in his countenance gave that away. At 5 feet 8, he was rather small compared to other police officers. He kept his head shaved and no one could tell that he was just thirty-four. He had come to Mumbai with his mother when he was five and the city was still called Bombay. His mother was a successful theater actress in Pune, some 160 KMs from Mumbai. His father was headmaster of a small school on the outskirts of a sleepy Pune. Even though they made an unlikely couple, theirs was a love marriage. But right after Prakash was born, the daily grind of the household began to test the patience of the couple. They started to quarrel, occasionally at first and almost everyday subsequently. His mother was young, talented and harbored the desire to be a film star. His father preferred the small town life. Their differences became so much that Prakash's mother decided to run away to Mumbai with Prakash in tow. But reality hit harder and sooner than she had expected. Her only appearances on screen were a few sightings in the background scenery of big films and a couple of side roles in smaller films. She, like others, turned to alcohol, hoping to find solutions and success.

Prakash's mother eventually committed suicide when he was thirteen. She was depressed about girls half her age getting meatier roles than her. Even in her death, she did not get the fame she craved for; there was not even one obituary. Prakash had no option but to go back to Pune. But by this time, his father had moved on and a young Prakash could not trace him. He came back to Bombay and put all his energy and time into his education. He never pardoned his mother for her ambitions and always blamed himself for not being able to find his father.

Back in Nidhi Kapoor's office, the room reeked of overpowering odors of animals, excreta, burnt flesh and air-conditioning. While examining the room, Prakash spotted a typed sheet of paper stuck in the typewriter. He used his phone to click a few pictures of the typewriter and the sheet of paper hanging from it. He then tore the sheet and started to read.

Most other officers would have waited for the police photographer to arrive and take pictures of the crime scene before they start with the investigation. Not Prakash. He liked to take action, and swiftly. He thus often disregarded protocol for the sake of speed. But he was careful enough with anything that could be used as evidence. He knew his technology and knew that pictures from an iPhone were as good as the ones from official police cameras. Probably better. No one used the pictures anyway, except the newspaper hounds, and that too when the pictures were leaked by the police department itself to try and generate some leads.

The letter was written in chaste English. Tambe was back and he saw Prakash reading the crumpled piece of paper with rapt attention. He chose to remain quiet as Prakash held the paper carefully from the edge and read through it.

"Whoever wrote this definitely has a knack for good prose. Too bad that the letter is at the crime scene, or the writer could have written a few films for the Kapoors," Prakash said and handed over the letter to Tambe, who carefully sealed it in an evidence bag. Tambe really wanted to read the letter but he wasn't good with English and more importantly, he knew that while Prakash went through a crime scene, he wanted everyone on their feet.

"Tambe, when was the last time you heard of a pet dog being friendly to outsiders? Plus, how do you kill three things at the same time? Why did the second or the third pet not protest when the first one was being killed? Why can't I see any signs of struggle? Maybe... maybe, he is right."

"Who, sir?"

"The murderer. He left a letter for us." Prakash pointed at the letter that Tambe had sealed in the evidence bag. Tambe gasped.

“Can we get an autopsy done on these animals to know what time they were killed?” he struggled to stay on track.

“Not autopsy Tambe, it’s called Necropsy. And yes, we will do it but nothing much would come out of it.” Prakash paused for a second and then exclaimed, “Look Tambe!” He was standing next to the yellow couch. He bent over the gramophone and pulled something out from the pile of vinyl records.

“What is it sir? A vinyl record? I have seen many of those at Chor Bazaar.” Tambe was trying to think hard and figure out the reason for Prakash’s excitement. Maybe the record had visible fingerprints or some blood spats or something that they had missed all this while.

“An original record for *Pyasa*, the Guru Dutt movie. I have always wanted to own one of these. It would fit in well with my collection.” Prakash started to read the back cover of the record.

Tambe sighed. “Sir what about these books? Do these film heroines actually read all these books?” He thought it was safe to get into idle banter, now that Prakash was not really focusing on the crime scene. The backup was still a few minutes away and they had to wait for the technicians to arrive.

“What about the books? Can’t you tell that these are just for display?” Prakash was still reading the cover. He hadn’t thrown a second glance at the bookshelf since he came into the room.

Tambe was visibly perplexed. “Display? How?”

“Tambe, look at the books crammed into the shelf. There is not one empty place in the entire shelf. Plus, the books are ordered as if a meticulous librarian did it. Not one book is out of place. People who actually read books, they usually read more than one book at a time. They always leave the books they are reading at strange places. This place is spotless,” Prakash answered.

“Now look at the gramophone here,” Prakash hadn’t stopped talking. He wanted Tambe to develop a knack for investigation and tried to train Tambe whenever he could. “Unlike the books that are hardly read, someone plays this gramophone regularly. A record’s been left in the slot. Plus, even though the vinyl records are stacked neatly like the books, some of them are not in their jackets, like this *Pyasa* record, and some have been left in the open around the player.”

Tambe nodded. “Right, sir. And there are no magazines? Our staple evening newspaper, Maha Sakaal, is also missing.” He paused as he thought of something. “Sir, which paper does Rujuta madam write for?”

“I don’t know. It’s some top-secret assignment for some international magazine,” Prakash replied carelessly. All I know is that I am supposed to keep her with us for a month and let her click whatever photographs she wants. Fifteen more days I think.”

Tambe began to laugh. He had this infectious laughter that could bring alive any drab situation. When he laughed, one could see all his teeth. Most of them had yellowed because of a lifetime addiction to tobacco, cigarettes and tea.

“What’s the joke, Tambe? Shut up and let’s get moving. I have seen what is there to be seen. See i. Ashok and team have arrived,” Prakash instructed. Tambe instantly shut his mouth, nodded and flipped out his walkie-talkie to speak to his colleagues. Ashok was a part of the forensics team attached to Prakash’s division.

“Let’s go and talk to Nidhi. You always wanted to meet her, right? Here is your chance,” Prakash said and headed out of the room.

Rujuta was still standing outside, next to the door. Her entire demeanor seemed resigned, but she looked in control. She tried to collect herself when she saw Prakash come out. Prakash looked at her. “Oh yes! I had almost forgotten about you. Are you fine? You had some water? You think you want to come with me when I talk to Nidhi Kapoor?” he asked.

Prakash rarely waited for answers. His orders often came in guise of requests, and requests in guise of questions. This sounded like a question and Tambe immediately knew that Prakash was asking Rujuta to come along, weather she liked it or not.

Tambe however had thought that Prakash would send Rujuta back. But by asking her to come along, Prakash made it clear that he wanted her by his side. Maybe he wanted to test her. Tambe wanted to protest but before he could speak, Rujuta replied, “Yes, I think I am better now. I’d come along. I want to come along. I need to catch whoever did this. Fucking butcher needs to get fucking punished.”

This was the first time Rujuta had shown any kind of emotion. So far, in her two weeks with Prakash and Tambe, she had come across as a fragile, pretty young thing. Both Prakash and Tambe were surprised at this change in demeanor.

Prakash merely nodded and walked hurriedly towards the hall with Tambe and Rujuta in tow.

4. Day 1, Afternoon. Ronak.

“So who do you think wants to kill you?” Prakash asked, again, to no one in particular. He always let his questions hang in mid-air like that. One of his theories was to ask questions to no one and then wait for the audience to answer. More often than not, whoever responded first, in all likelihood happened to know more than what they said.

The scene in Nidhi’s bedroom was morbid. She sat curled up like a fetus on the sill of a giant French window. The sill had a small platform that was padded with rich cushions and bolsters. It looked like Nidhi’s comfort place. Nidhi was holding onto her knees in front of her chest and was rocking back and forth slowly. The walls of the room were colored pastel blue, the color of summer. This was not for real, it could pass off as a scene from one of her numerous rom-com movies.

She was wearing a peach tank top made of linen and white shorts that snug her body tightly. Despite her distraught shape, a generous amount of her flawless skin was on display. Even though Prakash was known for his indifference towards the members of fairer gender, Nidhi’s well-sculpted structure did not escape his attention. Prakash concluded that Nidhi must be the kind to go to the gym religiously. Prakash also noticed that the windows behind Nidhi overlooked the garden and the swimming pool. He also saw the tall Ashoka trees in the distance and noticed that he could not see anything outside the periphery of the house. And vice versa.

Tambe looked mesmerized by the real life beauty of Nidhi Kapoor. This was the first time he was in the same room as the superstar. He had enough fodder to last multiple sessions of gossip with his friends and family. Everyone wanted to hear about Nidhi. She had that effect on people.

Other people in the room were in various states of anxiousness. Leaning against the headrest of the bed was yet another strikingly good-looking young woman. She was wearing a pair of skin-tight denims and a bright t-shirt. Her arms were folded in front of her chest. Prakash guessed that she must be Payal, Nidhi’s elder sister. Naveen Verma was sitting next to Payal on a chair. He still bore a look of hostility in his eyes and body language. He was talking softly to Payal and Prakash couldn’t hear their conversation. Two old servants, apparently a couple, were standing along the walls with their heads bent low. The woman appeared to be about sixty and was looking at Nidhi, while the man, appearing to be the same age, stood close to Verma.

Unlike the rest of the lavishly furnished house, Nidhi’s room was rather modest. Everything reeked of style and money but at the same time, was muted and lacked any overt or vulgar display of wealth. Apart from rich embroidered curtains, thick rugs and cushions of all shapes and sizes, very few items of vanity were at show. The bedroom did not have a single picture of Nidhi, Nishant or Neelima apart from a huge poster of Nishant Kapoors’ superhit, *Lahu Ka Rang*.

He noticed that the room did not have a single book. However, it did have a large television, a Sony Bravia, and a few DVDs stacked neatly in the cabinet, just the way books and vinyl records were stacked in the office. He noticed a tripod and a big Nikon DSLR resting on it. There was some sort of walk-in closet on the far side of the room. Prakash couldn’t see it from where he was standing, but could make out that it was a dressing room, closet, bath and storage, all rolled into one.

Prakash’s question still hung heavy in the air. He waited for Nidhi to answer but she continued to rock back and forth slowly on her hips. Payal was as non-committal. Verma spoke first, “This is not the right time to ask her such questions. Can’t you see she is troubled? If she was home last night, God knows what would have happened. You must leave us alone now. I’d have a word with Commissioner Joshi.”

Prakash shot an angry glance at Verma. Even though Prakash was a small man, his cold stare could easily send shivers down the spine of even hardened criminals. Verma, however, did not flinch. He instead got up from the chair he was sitting on, stepped between Prakash and Nidhi and folded his arms across his chest. Prakash was bemused and exasperated. He wondered if Verma was either genuinely overprotective of Nidhi or was trying desperately to show off his loyalty.

“I am merely trying to help your family here. I don’t really care about these mutts but the way they were killed is serious,” Prakash said. “I am sure you are used to getting death threats often, but do any of you realize that this time it is for real?”

Prakash turned around. “Tambe, give me that letter.”

He literally snatched the paper from Tambe and placed it on the empty chair that was previously occupied by Verma.

“This letter was left in the typewriter in the room downstairs. If after reading this you change your mind, you may come to see me.”

At the mention of the typewriter, Nidhi turned slowly to look at Prakash. Prakash noticed the movement and for an instant, he and Nidhi looked into each other’s eyes. She did not betray any emotion and before Prakash could note anything out of place, she broke the visual handshake to glance around the room. She was searching for the letter that Prakash was talking about. She found it resting on the chair in a transparent evidence bag. She looked at the letter and stared briefly at Prakash and then at her sister, Payal. Finally she rested her eyes on the letter again.

Prakash noticed Nidhi staring at the letter. He turned around and left the room. Tambe followed him with a nonchalant walk. Rujuta was too dumbfounded to make anything of this. She was standing close to the door and after Prakash and Tambe walked past her, she felt weighed down by responsibility and did not know how to react or make a retreat.

Rujuta climbed down the stairs two at a time and ran after Prakash and Tambe. She caught up with them when they had reached the lawn and were almost out of the main entrance of Ronak. “What is this? You’d simply walk away? You’re not being responsible Prakash,” Rujuta said.

Prakash looked at her, started to say something, and stopped abruptly. Tambe and Rujuta turned around to see what had caught Prakash’s attention. They were stunned to find Nidhi Kapoor running towards them. Nidhi had suddenly transformed into this bobbling mass of energy from a shock-stricken young dame.

“Wait, wait,” she was panting. She was almost out of breath. “Wait a minute please. I want to speak to you about this.”

She was holding the letter in her left hand and was waving it frantically in the air. Tailing Nidhi were Verma and Payal.

Prakash was curt, “What about it? Your uncle seems to know better than us and believes that he does not need our help. We are anyway short-staffed and...”

“I apologize for him, please,” Nidhi interrupted Prakash in mid-speech. She looked him in the eyes and continued, “I am not worried about the letter. I have been getting such letters and threats since I was a kid. I saw my father get these by the tons all the time. But it’s not about me. It’s about Caesar, Cho and Cookie. They are very important to Payal and I. I really want to know who killed them and why. Please help me.”

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