

NALINI

— ON —

VACATION

A Marine Drive Murder Mystery

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— Master Storyteller of Crime & Suspense —



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Nalini on Vacation



By Chakradhar Dhaulakhandi



Nalini went to Delhi because Tula Ram had gone to Uttarakhand after completing the Murder Mystery case to take a complete rest. She didn't want to disturb him by going there. Then she thought of meeting her friend in Mumbai. She had rung her many times and requested her to come and meet her and her husband. But Nalini was with her parents in Kanpur. She met KAKA there. When he heard from Nalini that she had decided to settle with Tula Ram, he was very happy. His nephew had been promoted to ASP and posted to Sitapur. He had not yet married. She felt for him.

Nalini also intimated this to her parents. Her mother was happy. She also met Aunty of Tula Ram and talked about her marrying Tula Ram. She was very excited to hear this and gave a Kangan to her and said, 'The other piece of Kangan you will get when you come to this house as a bride with Tula.' She shied and touched the feet of the Aunty. Then she returned to her house. She also visited her School and college and met some of the teachers at school and college. Then she came to Delhi. Once, she thought of meeting ACP Tarun. But hesitated to meet him alone. So, she thought, go to Mumbai and meet her friend Neeti. She rang her and told her. Neeti was very excited and requested to be informed of the date and time of her departure when she booked the ticket, so that she would be received at the airport along with her husband. She booked the ticket and informed Neeti.

The plane arrived at about 1.30 in the afternoon. After checkout, she came out of the exit gate. She had one suitcase and one backpack. A big purse was hanging on her left shoulder. When she came out, she saw Neeti. She advanced towards her. Neeti also saw her and came forward and grabbed her in her arms. They both hugged each other with a laugh. Neeti's husband also came near them. After some time, she turned towards him, and Neeti introduced him to Nalini. She said, 'His name is Adars Malhotra, and he is a senior manager in a Multinational Company. We live near Marine Drive. His parents, I mean my in-laws, live in Poona. He is the only son of his parents. Though he had two elder sisters, they were married and lived in different places in America and Canada.'

He folded his hands and wished Nalini. Nalini also folded her hands. While taking the suitcase, he said, 'Thank God, you have come. Neeti was telling me about you. Now, at least she will not bother me anymore.'

Neeti looked at him with a sharp eye and said, 'He has got the wrong impression about our friendship. But you tell me, Nalini, only we two were together from school to college when you stopped further study in the first year and joined a company as a PA, and went to Singapore.'

Nalini smiled, and Adars said, 'I think we should move now. She might be tired and want something to eat and some rest.'

'No, I have already taken something on the plane.'

'You will have more time to chat when you sit on the sofa. Come, we should move now.'

Adarsa had brought his car. They sat in the car. Nalini and Neeti were sitting in the back, and Adarsh drove.

They reached home. It had two bedrooms on the third floor. There was a lift. So, it was good enough to live. Nalini's room was on

the roadside, which she liked. After changing her dress, she came to the drawing room.

Adarsa also came into the drawing room, sat on the sofa in front of her, and said, 'You might be feeling hungry. I have ordered lunch. We will have it, and then you can rest. In the evening, we can go out for dinner, or if Neeti prepares it at home, we will eat here.'

With a smile, Nalini said, 'No, really, I am not hungry. I already had it on the plane.'

In the meantime, Neeti came there. Adarsa told her that he had ordered lunch. She became annoyed and said, 'I was thinking of preparing lunch. Why had you ordered?'

'Neetu, just see the time, it is 3.30 p.m. You will start preparing now. It will take at least one hour. Then, what is the use of having lunch at that time? So, I have ordered.'

'He had all the reasons at his fingertips. See what he is saying.' Neeti told this to Nalini. Nalini laughed, and Adarsa smiled.

While standing from the sofa, Adarsa said, 'Now you both chat, and I will take some rest till lunch is served.' And he went to his room.



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The two days passed. When Adarsa left for his office, Neeti took her for a walk to many places. In the evening, they were going to Marine Drive. They sit on the wall or walk on the footpath on Sundays. Adarsa took them to show Nalini, along with Neeti, a Devi Temple and sometimes the famous gardens or monuments. Generally,

they have their dinner at a hotel. The time passed, and Nalini didn't know.

One day, when Adars had gone to the office, Nalini and Neeti were sitting in the drawing room, chatting and thinking about shopping. At that time, Neeti's phone rang. She took the call. It was from Adarsa. With surprise, she asked, 'Have you reached the office? Why are you calling? Is everything okay there?'

Then, she heard the other side. As she heard, her face turned white, and she asked, 'How is she now?' She listened to the other side and said, 'I will be ready. But don't drive fast and keep your nerves in control. She will be alright.' She disconnected the call and looked far away in disgust.

Nalini saw her face and asked, 'What happened, Neeti?' But she didn't reply. Nalini kept her hand on her shoulder and asked, 'What is the matter with you, Neeti? Is everything okay?'

She came to the present and whispered, 'My mother-in-law is serious and admitted to a Hospital in Poona.'

'Then, you should go. You will be needed there to take care of her. Who is there at present?'

'My father-in-law is there. But he is also old.'

'Call Adarsa, and you both should go. Except you, who are the family members there?'

'No one is there. Adarsa is the only son. He had two elder sisters; both were married. One of them lives in America and the other in Canada. So, he is the only son nearby. He was also selected by a multinational Company, as a software engineer in America. But he cancelled it as he didn't want to leave his parents alone.'

‘You are a lucky girl, Neeti. You have such a devoted husband. Now, get your clothes and other items. When Adarsa comes, go to Poona.’

‘But what about you?’

Nalini laughed and said, ‘I am accustomed to living alone. In Delhi, I also live alone. So don’t worry about me. I can manage.’

‘Sure? Neeti asked, while standing from the sofa.

‘Don’t worry about me. Go and pack.

Neeti looked at her sorrowfully and went to her room.

Within an hour, Adarsa had come. His face was also whitened, and he looked very nervous. Nalini received him at the door and consoled him, saying, ‘Adarsa, you are a mature man. If you are feeling nervous, then how will you drive? Nothing will happen to your mother. I assure you. If you are feeling nervous, then hire a taxi.

‘No, Didi, I will manage.’

‘Then go and pack everything you will require. In the meantime, I will prepare the tea. But before that, you go and wash your face.’ He went straight to his room, and Nalini went to the kitchen.

Within an hour, they were ready and came to the drawing room with a suitcase and a backpack. Nalini prepared the tea and kept it on the table. A few biscuits on a plate, they looked at her. Nalini smiled and said, ‘Drink the tea.

Adarsa said, ‘No, Didi, I don’t like to drink.’

Neeti also said, ‘I am not likely to drink or eat anything.’

Nalini became serious and said, ‘There is a belief that, if you go after taking some food or tea to see a patient, then you will find him

or her in good health. So please take. I don't mind if you sip a drop and eat a piece of the biscuit.'

Reluctantly, they drank and took one biscuit each.

'Nalini, I am sorry that you have to live alone.' Neeti said, kept a bunch of keys on the table and said, 'These are the keys to the house. If you go out, please lock the doors.'

Nalini said, 'I don't think that I will go out. In case I go, I will go up to Marine Drive in the evening. But please, inform me about your mother-in-law's health. I hope she will recover soon.'

Adarsa thanked her, and both went out.



(3)

Nalini received a call from Neeti in the evening, at about five. She told her that her mother-in-law is improving now. Initially, she complained of chest pain. My father-in-law was panicked, and with the help of the neighbours, he took her to the hospital, and she was admitted there. After carrying out the ECG, she was diagnosed as an acidic and gastric patient. Now she is improving. Nalini congratulated her and told her to stay with them for some more time. She also suggested bringing her to Mumbai for further treatment. She should not worry about me. She can vacate that room for them. Neeti thanked her and disconnected the call.

The next day, she remained at home. She went out at about three in the afternoon. She went straightaway to Marin Drive to see the ocean. She found many gentlemen and ladies sitting on the seaside wall or roaming on the footpath. There were two walls, one of small height and the other, four to five feet high. Then there were stone

boulders at the seaside to protect the wall when the water struck the wall. Some ladies and gents were standing on the wall and looking at the currents striking the boulders and the wall. Nalini also stood on the wall and looked the currents striking. She thought that, after striking, the water might rise up to the top of the wall.

One young couple is sitting on their left side, holding each other's hands and looking at the sea. They were talking to each other, but Nalini could not hear. She turned her face and looked at the ocean. Nalini took some photos of the ocean and a few selfies. Then she thought of going on the path for a walk.

Suddenly, she saw something peculiar when the current struck the stone boulders. She bent and looked below at the sea. Again, a current of lower speed. Now she saw very clearly. The dead body of a man was floating in the sea near the boulders. The current might have brought the body that was lying in the water. She shouted, 'Body, a body of a man, see there.' And she indicated towards the body in the sea with her finger. People sitting on her side first looked at her, and then out to the sea. When they saw the body in the water, they stood on the wall and started shouting. The neighbour couple also saw the boy, jumped from the wall, and ran outside to the traffic police. He said something to him, and both came running. Nalini looked at the boy with praise for calling the traffic police. Both came near her, and the traffic police asked, 'Where is the body?'

She indicates both. He stood on the wall and saw the body, just near the stones. He took out his phone and rang the police station. Keeping his phone in his pocket, he jumped onto the stones on the seaside. Cautiously, he descended, keeping his feet on the stones. When he reached at the bottom near the water, he sat there, extended his left hand and tried to catch the head of the body. But his hand couldn't reach up to the head of the body. After trying two or three times, he looked back and asked the people to come down to help him. A few men came down and stood on the boulders.

The constable said to them, 'Catch your hands with each other and make a chain, and one of you should catch my hand. Then I will try to pull the body. We must do it fast, as the body can float away with the next current. Please do it fast.'

They held hands one after another up to the top of the wall. A heavy man held the hand of the constable. The constable sat and extended his hand to catch the body. But he could not catch it as it was floating from one side to the other. Ultimately, he descended onto a boulder that was in the water. He again sat and tried to catch. This time, he held the man's hair and pulled it. He requested that the man pull him. They all pulled, and the body reached a place that was above the water. Then, with the help of men, he brought the body and put it on the footpath. He thanked all and asked to be there for the statement to the police. He also asked Nalini and the boy who called him to be there.

A police jeep arrived, with four constables. They got down. There was one Inspector. An ambulance also arrived with a doctor and two male nurses. Traffic police showed the inspector the place from where the dead body was recovered. He nodded, saw the place, and told the traffic police to go to his duty place, as the traffic was stranded to see the dead body. Then he turned to the gathered people and asked, 'Do you recognise him?'

All answered in the negative. Then he said, 'Those who have seen the body first and those who helped to bring the body with the traffic police, will remain here, and the rest of the people, please go from here.'

Five men and Nalini remained there, and the rest of the people went back, but stood at some distance.

The doctor checked the body and his eyes. Then, he checked his whole body and said, 'There are no marks on his body, so he had not been hurt. It may be a suicide case. The death timing may be 12 to 14

hours early. We will do the postmortem to ascertain the exact time and cause of the death.

The deceased man was wearing black pants and a yellow T. shirt. The inspector checked his pockets, but nothing was found.

Nalini was looking at the doctor when he was checking the body's eyes. She noticed something peculiar in his eyes. She came forward and asked the inspector, 'Excuse me, sir, if you don't mind, can I check the eyes of the deceased?'

The inspector looked at her sharply and asked her, 'Why do you want to check?'

Politely, Nalini said, 'Sir, maybe I can find something.'

She came to the body. She bent and opened both eyes. She looked for some time and stood, and said, 'His eyes show that he was not expecting that type of brutal death. The murderer was either he or she from whom he was not expecting that he or she would kill him. There might be two people or maybe one man who threw him in the ocean and kept him underwater till he died. Then he threw his body into the deeper sea. So, the murderer might be known to him.'

The inspector and the doctor raised their eyebrows. They were mesmerised by her theory. Ultimately, the inspector asked, 'How do you know this?'

Nalini smiled and said, 'Simple, sir, I know the reaction of the eyes. But whatever I said is correct. You find out if anyone is missing. But this is also a difficult task. Maybe he is an outsider and came to Mumbai with his wife or friends. Check Hotels, if anyone had come and left from the hotel. Don't check big Hotels. Check small and cheap hotels.'

The inspector saw her face with astonishment, and asked, 'What is your name?'

‘I am Nalini from Delhi. I have come here to meet my friend Neeti. But yesterday she had gone to Poona to meet her in-laws along with her husband. So, I came here to see the ocean. I had never seen the ocean before. So, I stood on the wall and took some photos of the sea and some selfies. At that time, I saw the body and raised an alarm.’

‘But you are speaking as if you are the boss. How do you know all this?’

She smiled and said, ‘Mr. Inspector, any layman will know this. Had he been in a big hotel, he would have come to this side for a walk wearing a good dress, as others had come. But he seems to be in an ordinary dress without shoes. Moreover, the sand particles are seen under his T-shirt. This shows that he was living in a cheap hotel where sand is. This also shows from his dress that he was living in a cheap hotel.’

The inspector thought whatever she had told had weight. He again thought for a moment and asked, ‘Can you give me your phone number and address?’

‘Of course, yes,’ Nalini said, ‘I can give my phone number. I cannot give the address as I came here one week ago. But I had not asked my friend about the address. But it is sure that I live behind that office. If you send someone with me, I will show the house to him.’

‘No, at present the phone number will do. But you might be leaving when your friend returns.’

‘No, you give me your phone number, and I will inform you if I go early.’

‘One more question, the inspector asked her, ‘Why are you thinking that he was murdered at the beach? Have you got any idea?’

Nalini smiled and said, ‘It is only my guess. However, the postmortem report will suggest the nature of death.’ Then she turned

to the doctor and asked, 'Can it be possible that he was murdered by putting him into the seawater?'

'At present, I can't say. It will be determined during the postmortem whether seawater is present in his lungs and stomach. We will examine this at that time.'

Nalini asked, 'When will you be able to give your report?'

'Maybe tomorrow.'

'Okay.' Then she turned to the inspector and said, 'Sir, please inform me when the report is received.'

The inspector nodded. The body was sent to the hospital in an ambulance. The doctor also went in the same vehicle. The Inspector started taking statements of all, including Nalini. Nalini said to the inspector, 'Sir, my work is over now. I want to go from here to see a beach. Can you guide me to where I can find a beach?'

The inspector told her to go straight off the path, and she would find the beach. She thanked him and marched to that side of the footpath.



(4)

The next day, Nalini received a call from Neeti. She gave good news that her mother-in-law has improved, and doctors will discharge her in the evening. Then she said, 'Nalin, we are thinking of bringing my in-laws to Mumbai for further treatment. We want to get her a thorough checkup from the big doctors. They may give her good medicines for acidity and gastrointestinal because her health is

deteriorating day by day. I have suggested to them that I will remain with them at Poona, and Adarsa can live alone there.'

Nalini, with joy, said, 'You are thinking very well, Neetu. You bring her here and get her fully checked up

Neeti, a worried tone said, 'But you will feel uncomfortable....'

Nalini interrupted and said, 'Don't worry about me. I will adjust. I will vacate that room for uncle and aunty, and they will live there.'

'And what about you?'

Nalini laughed and said, 'What do you think, I will leave the opportunity and go to some hotel? No, Neetu, I will remain here only. I will put a piped charpoy in that room and sleep with them.'

'But.' She wanted to say, but Nalini again interrupted and said, don't worry about me, I am accustomed to living in any condition. I can look after uncle and aunt.'

At last, Neeti said, 'Okay then, we are coming tomorrow morning.'

Then they disconnected the calls. She started preparing tea for herself. She thought to take the tea and then go for breakfast at a nearby hotel. When she brought her tea into the drawing-room, her phone rang. It was from the Inspector. She took the call and said, 'Hello, sir, I am Nalini.'

The inspector said, 'Ma'am, I had just received the postmortem report of that man. You were right, Ma'am. He died of asphyxia. The water found in his lungs and stomach was salty. One more thing, the doctor mentioned that he found sand particles in the stomach.'

'It means he was killed.' She spoke.

'Yes, ma'am.'

‘What type of sand did he find?’

‘That he had not mentioned.’

‘Ask him. I want to know the colour of the sand. Because the sand, as I have seen, is somewhat brown. It will give an idea for our investigation. Tell him that it is urgent.’

‘Okay, ma’am, I will just go and ask him.’

Then they disconnected the call. And she started sipping the tea.

The next day, at about 12.30 at noon, Neeti came with her in-laws. In the meantime, she had packed her suitcase. When they entered, she happily met them and touched their feet. Though they were surprised to see her. Then she introduced herself and said, ‘Uncle, Aunty, I am Nalini, a friend of Neeti. I came here to meet her.’ They both nodded. In the meantime, Adarsa kept their luggage on one side and came near them and said, ‘Mamma, she is Nalini, my Didi, friend of Neeti. This time, Aunty blessed her and asked, ‘Are you married?’

Her face turned reddish, and with a shy smile, she said, ‘No, Aunty. Not yet. But with your blessing, I will get married soon.’

Then they were sifted to the room where Nalini was staying. Aunty lay on the bed, and Uncle sat on the other bed. Then Neeti came to Nalini and said, ‘I am sorry, Nalini. But couldn’t leave them in this condition.’

‘You have done a nice job. You don’t bother me. I will manage.’

Adarsa also came, and he heard what Nalini said. He, with an annoyed tone, said, ‘What will you manage? I am not going to leave my father and mother alone in that room. We had a piped charpoy. I will put it there and sleep with them till Mamma gets well, and you will sleep with Neeti in that room. So, don’t try to manage, you are not going anywhere.’

‘I am not going anywhere, Adarsa. I was thinking of lying on this sofa, which is also comfortable. Why do you want to sleep with Papa Mamma? I can also care for them.’

‘No, since long I never slept with them. Now I have an opportunity to sleep with them. I will remain there till she is cured. Tomorrow, I will take them to the Hospital and get her checked thoroughly. Now you are not going anywhere. You are not only the friend of Neeti, but you are also my Didi. This is my duty to see that you are comfortable.’

Oh, you are a very shrew man. Okay, Baba, I will sleep with Neetu. Now you go to your Papa and Mamma. We will prepare the lunch.’

‘No, we will call from the Hotel...’

Nalini, with an annoyed tone, said, ‘You want to increase her acidity? No, she requires a home-made digestible food. You go away from here. Neeti, go and ask them what they want to eat.’

Neeti looked smilingly at Adarsa and went to the room where her in-laws were sitting. Then they prepared the food as per their liking.

It was three of the day. Nalini was sitting in the drawing room. Adarsa was placing a charpoy into Papa's room, and Neeti was arranging the clothes. At that time, the doorbell rang. Nalini went and opened the door. The inspector was standing at the door with a worried face. Nalini asked, ‘How did you find the house, sir?’

The inspector said, ‘Simple. I checked the location of your phone and came here.’

‘Come inside, sir. What happened? Your face seems worried. Come inside.’

The inspector entered the room, and Nalini closed the door and asked him to sit. Then she brought a glass of water and offered him.

He held the glass and drank it. After keeping the glass on the centre table, Nalini sat in front of him on the other sofa. He looked at the face of Nalini and said, 'ACP and SP are very annoyed with me and want the case to be closed, as all are sure that the man died of suicide. But I requested them, I have got some proof and want to investigate that line. They gave me only 15 days. Then the case will be closed.'

Nalini smiled and said, '15 days are not required. You do one thing: spread your men and sources at all beaches along with a photo of the deceased man. They should check all the beaches, whether there is anyone knows him, and if the sand is black. Sand may not be black. It may be brown or whitish. Check also if anywhere, firewood has been burnt on the beach. This can also turn the sand black. You try to find those places, and then we will go and check that spot. Ask your men to show the photo to the visiting people at and from the cheap hotels, if anyone identifies him. I will also go to the nearby beaches.' Nalini explained to him.

The inspector was not sure that he would find anything. In the meantime, Adarsa came there. He was surprised to see a Police Officer. Had Nalini done anything?' He was worried and asked, 'What happened, Didi? Why police here? Had you committed anything wrong?'

Nalini smiled and said, 'I have not committed any crime. But I have seen the dead body of a man in the sea.' Then she narrated the whole story to Adarsa. When she finished, the inspector said, 'She had given us a piece of valuable information. We thought that the man had died by committing suicide. But he was murdered. Now I came to her for further guidance. Now she has given some advice. So, I will do so accordingly and will report to her. You need not worry, mister.'

Adarsa returned, but he looked at Nalini with surprise.

When the inspector was gone, Adarsa asked Nalini, 'Are you a detective, Didi?'

Nalini laughed and said, 'I am not a detective. I just thought of doing it like this.'

'But he is an Inspector. They know what to check and how. Then why had he come to ask you?'

'Sometimes the layman gives vital advice. I have given him. You know, his seniors have forced him to close the case. But they cannot close till the man is identified.'

'Didi, you don't put yourself in this case. We cannot trust the police. Tomorrow, they may ask you why you were standing on the wall. Why have you seen the dead body? Etc..etc.'

'Don't worry, Adarsa. I promise you that nothing will happen to me. I can take care of myself.'

Adarsa went to his parents' room, and Nalini sat on the sofa in thought.



(5)

In the evening, she came out and went on the road.

She hired a taxi and told the taxi driver to take her to a beach while going straightaway.

The driver started the cab and took her to the beach near the Marine Drive. She had come a day before yesterday.

She got down and told him to wait; she would be back soon.

When she reached the beach, she saw some ladies burning wood to prepare the food.

Men were sitting on one side, and their children were playing near the sea on the sand. They were all labourers. She asked a lady very politely, 'What are you doing?' The lady laughed and shied. The other ladies, who were near her, looked at her and smiled. When she again asked, the lady said, 'I am cooking rice.'

'Where do you live?'

She again laughed and said, 'Here only.'

'In the night also?'

'Yes.'

'You are not doing any work?'

'We do in the daytime; we go to work. But at night we come here.'

'Where have you come?'

Shamatipur, Bihar.'

'And you work here? Bihar is very far from here.' Nalini asked with surprise. They again laughed. Then she stood and went to the seashore. After checking the seaside, she saw that the burnt coal dust was spread on the sides of the sea on the beach. The big pieces of the coal were taken in sea with the current, but dust was still seen near the beach. Her eyes sparkled. She thought that this might be the place where he was murdered. But her joy remained for a short period. A thought came to her mind, that it may be possible that there may be some other beaches where labourers are living, burning woods and throwing the dust in the sea. She decided to check out some other beaches also.

She came out and, while getting in the taxi, told the driver to take her to the other beach. The driver started the taxi and moved further. Within 15 minutes, he stopped and said that there is one beach. She got down. She went to the beach. There was a heavy rush on that side.

People were standing near the seawater or playing and laughing. Most of them were couples. She gazed at them for some time. Then she turned to see around. She saw that some items were kept at the entry gate. She went there and found two to three chullhas made of bricks at different places, and the firewood was kept under a poly Tripoline. But chullhas were clean. It might be clear that while going to work, they might have cleaned the dust from there. She went to the shore of the sea and checked from one side to the other. But no dust particles were seen. Disgusted, she returned. When she reached to the top, she saw two men and a woman were taking out the Tripoline from a bunch of household items. She stood there and asked the lady, 'Do you live here at night?'

The lady hesitated. A man came to her and said, 'Yes, we live here.'

'Why don't you make a Tripoline hut?'

He said, 'It is not permitted here. It is permitted on the back side of these blocks. But we must pay a heavy rent for that place. Moreover, it is far away from our workplace.'

Nalini asked, 'You are not afraid that someone might take your belongings?'

'We are not having any costlier items. But we have been living here for the last three months. Nothing has happened so far.'

'You cook your food here only?'

'Yes.'

'How many are you?'

'We are fifteen members.'

She thanked him and came out to the taxi.



(6)

The next day, she rang the inspector and asked about the progress. He told her that his men are on the job. But no one knew that man. She asked for a photo of the deceased on her mobile phone and said, 'I have a doubt. There are some Bihari labourers living near the seaside wall. They are preparing their food by burning firewood. Then they are throwing coal and coal dust near the seashore. I had seen it at two places. But there was no cheap hotel. There is a big building, and, on the other side, there is a big hotel on the roadside.'

'Ma'am, where is that big hotel. There are two hotels behind it. One is the Bombay Hotel, and the other is the Sea Hotel. Both are cheap hotels. They provide rooms at nominal rates. They also serve breakfast, lunch and dinner at cheap rates. They are three-storey buildings. There is a road to go upwards, as it is a hilly area, and after 100 feet, you can find those hotels.'

'Thank you, inspector, you sent the photo, and I will try to find the hotels. What your- -men had found?'

'Ma'am, they had checked towards the Nariman points and the Borowali side. Now they will be shifted to the other side.'

'Okay, you also put your civil sources on the job and give them the photo of the deceased man.'

'That I have already put on the job.'

'Okay then. Bye and send the photo.' Then she switched off.

The next day, Neeti and her husband took their parents to the Hospital for a checkup. When they were going, Nalini said to Neeti, 'I

may go out. If you come early and the door is locked, please call me. I may go to Marin Drive.'

'What are you doing, Nalin? I am very worried about you.'

She smiled and said, 'At least I got some work.'

Neeti didn't say a word and went out with her in-laws.

When they had gone, she came out, called a taxi and went near that hotel at the roadside. When she looked at the beachside, the people were roaming there. They were mostly couples. The Biharis were not seen there. Their luggage was packed inside the Tripoline, and chullahs were clean.

She crossed the road and looked at the roadside hotel. It was a multi-storey building. A road was there on its left side. The road was on a hilly track. She walked on that road, and after some time, she saw a hotel. A signboard was seen on its top, where it was written, 'Bombay Hotel.' She entered the hotel, There was a big reception hall. The stairs were seen on the right side of the reception counter. A few sofas were placed on the right side of the entrance. A lady was sitting on the reception counter. Nalini went straight to her. The receptionist stood from her seat, 'and politely asked, 'What can I do for you, madam?'

Nalini said, 'I forgot the name. But I want to find a man who gave me a hotel's name. But now I forget the name of the hotel. I rang him, but his phone is switched off. But he told me that the hotel is at the back of a big hotel which is on the roadside.'

'Yes, this is at the backside of that big hotel. It is the Bombay Hotel. What do you want?'

'My friend was here with some of his friends. His name was Rakesh. But I don't know his room number.'

'Madam, what can I say. Unless the room number is there, I can't say anything.'

'I will show you a photo. Maybe you can recognise him.' Nalini took out her phone and showed a photo of the deceased man. The receptionist looked at the photo but could not recognise it and denied.

'Are you sure. Have you not seen him? He might have come here five days ago.'

'Sorry, madam, I can't remember him. But he seems to be a dead body.'

Nalini said, 'Yes, you are right. He died of asphyxia. Someone murdered him.'

An old lady was standing there who came through the steps from some room on the first floor to hand over the room key. When she heard about the dead body, she came near to her and asked, 'Show me this photo.'

Nalini looked at her and extended the phone. She held the phone in her hand and looked at the photo minutely and said, 'I have seen this man. But where? I don't remember. But he was not alone. He was with a heavy-built man and a beautiful lady. At that time, they were laughing in joy. I heard the lady saying, 'You have not shown me any beach. Four days had passed, and you are taking me to other places only.' Then, this man said something which I could not hear as they were moved further on the road and turned to the right side from the main road.'

Nalini was excited and asked, 'Where had you seen them?'

The lady said, 'They were coming from the upper side of the road. Might be from that upper-side hotel. But I am not sure. I have seen them when I was relaxing outside.'

'When have you seen them and at what time?'

'Four days back, I saw them.'

‘Thank you, Ma’am. Now I will find them.’ Then she came out and proceeded to the seaside hotel. She reached to the hotel and entered the hotel. It was also a three-story hotel. But smaller than the Bombay Hotel. A man was standing at the receptionist’s counter. Nalini went to him. The man asked her, ‘Yes, madam?’

Nalini said, ‘I want to inquire about a man who was with his friend and a lady in this hotel.’

The receptionist looked at her with a puzzled manner and asked, ‘What do you want to know?’

Nalini looked around. Some couples were sitting on the sofas waiting for their turn to get a room. Nalini showed the photo of the deceased man and asked, ‘Was he living here along with his friends?’

The receptionist saw the photo of the deceased. Nalini said, ‘Tell me the room numbers.’

‘But four days back, this man had left for Delhi.’

‘Why?’

‘That I don’t know. The receptionist said, ‘The three went from here at six in the evening. Before that, in the daytime, the lady came to me and asked about the departure time of the plane to Delhi. I gave her all the information. Then at six, they left with two backpacks, one each for the men and one long handbag on the shoulder of the lady. They returned at what time? I don’t know. Because my duty was up to seven at night.’

‘Who was on duty after that?’

‘Prakash Mazumdar.’

‘Have you seen them the next day?’

‘I have seen the lady and that well-built man.’

‘Are they still there?’

‘I don’t know. I have not seen them.’

Nalini thought for some time and asked, ‘Can you give me the name of them?’

‘Sorry, madam. I cannot divulge the names.’

‘Okay, can you give me their room numbers?’

‘Sorry, madam.’

‘Okay.’ She said and took out her phone and called the inspector. When the call was matured, she asked him, ‘Can you come to the seaside hotel? I have found out about the deceased man. But now I need you.’

The inspector assured her that he would be reached within fifteen minutes.

Then she came out of the hotel. Some three or four men were fighting there. Suddenly, one man took out a small pistol and fired. The bullet hit the left shoulder of Nalini. She cried and fell on the ground. Again, a fire was shot from the first floor of the hotel. But it struck the ground near her. Then she heard the footsteps of people. Many people gathered around her and started shouting. She raised her head and looked at her shoulder. Blood was oozing from her shoulder, but the bullet narrowly passed from the side, touching her shoulder.

The receptionist also came along with his staff, Nalini said to him, ‘Give me some clothes to tie around my shoulder. The receptionist held her and said, ‘Come, we will put a bandage on it. In the meantime, one man brought a glass of water and gave her. She drank the water and stood with the help of the staff. They brought her inside, and a man brought the First-Aid box. Then he called for a glass of water and asked her to drink. She drank it.

In the meantime, the inspector came in. When he saw a bandage on the shoulder of Nalini, he was surprised and came near to her and asked, 'What happened, Ma'am?'

All the people who were surrounding her went a little distance from her. Nalini smiled and narrated all the happenings to him and said, 'You ask the receptionist about that man and his accomplices and the room number. And check if they are still there.'

The inspector looked at the receptionist and asked, 'Give me the details first.' He went to his table, checked the computer, brought a sheet of paper and handed it to the inspector. He read it and handed it to Nalini. Nalini looked and said, 'The deceased man was Mukesh, and the other man is Samir. Both were in room number 6, and the lady, whose name was Amrita, was in room number 7. No, sir, the name is not given. Now, we should go and check the rooms.'

'Yes, I will go and check the rooms. You'd better go to the doctor. You take the jeep and get proper treatment. But who shot at you?'

'I was asking about those men and the lady. One of them might have heard that I am enquiring about them. When I went outside after talking to you, one man fired at me. After some time, a shot was fired from the first floor of the hotel. I think one of them might have heard me talking to you. Otherwise, they would not have fired. The bullets might have stuck to the ground where I was lying. Get checked outside. You will find the bullets.'

'That I will do, ma'am. God is great that you are safe. I will depute my men to find out the bullets.' The inspector told and asked the receptionist to show the rooms. The receptionist agreed and directed the inspector to the first floor. When they reached there, they found room number 6 was open, and room number 7 was closed.

The inspector entered room number 6 with him. It was empty, and even the beds were very well prepared. He examined the room and

the toilet thoroughly. Nothing was there. Then he moved to room number 7. It was closed and locked. Then he asked the receptionist, 'Where are the keys?'

He said, 'They are with them, sir.'

'You might be having a duplicate key or master key?'

'Yes, sir, the master key is there on the reception table.'

'Go and bring it.' He ordered him. He went out. In the meantime, Nalini also came there. When the inspector saw her, he said, 'Why are you coming here. You take rest.'

'I am fine, sir. What have you found in that room?'

'Nothing, ma'am. They might have vacated that room. It is completely swept.'

The receptionist brought the key and opened the door. The inspector entered the room. Nalini also followed him/ There were also two beds, and it seems that the bed was used.

'Whose room is this?' Asked by Nalini.

'Madam, that I don't know. They asked for two rooms. One for the lady and one for two men.'

The inspector opened the cupboard. There was a suitcase. It was locked, and one purse of big size. He took that purse and opened it. Then he was surprised to see the contents in it. When Nalini saw him in surprise, she came near him and looked in the bag. There were packets of drugs. Nalini smiled and said, 'So they were doing this.'

The inspector came to present and said, 'Now, I should inform my seniors. We will open this suitcase in their presence.' Then he rang the SP and ASP and intimated about the finding of the drug. Then he said to Nalini, 'Madam, it seems that he was murdered due to some dispute among them.'

‘Yes, it seems so.’ Nalini said, ‘They might have planned to murder him and pretended that one of them was going to Delhi. It means they had planned much earlier.’

‘But where had they murdered him?’

‘Very simple, at the bank of the sea, just opposite side of the road. We should ask the labourer living there to cook food. They are clearing the burnt coal and dust by throwing it in the sea or near the seashore.’

Nalini checked below the bed. There was nothing. Then she checked the toilet. She found two toothbrushes and a bottle of shampoo. She brought it and kept it on the bed. Then she came to the bedroom. She took out the bed sheet. A foam bed was laid on the wooden cot. She turned the foam. The cover of the foam was cut at one side from the bottom. She put her hand inside the sheet. Something felt there. She grabbed it and pulled it out. It was a bundle of notes of 500/- denomination. She was surprised and looked at it in astonishment. The inspector also came to her. He also gazed at the bundle. The bundle was tied with a rubber band.

Nalini handed the bundle over to him. He checked it and said, ‘These seem to be counterfeit notes. From where had they found and kept here?’

Then the receptionist asked for permission to go to the counter. But the inspector told him to remain there and call the Manager. Reluctantly, he called the manager and then called a man and told him to look after him as he is busy with the police.

When they were checking the notes, SP and ASP entered the room. Both were young. The inspector saluted them. SP looked furiously at Nalini and asked, ‘She was living in this room?’

The inspector said, ‘No, sir, she is Nalini who informed us about the dead body in the sea. She checked his eyes and said that he had been murdered. After receiving the postmortem report, black sand was

found in his lungs and stomach. Accordingly, I requested some more time to investigate the case. Though I have put my men, she also helps us and found that at two places the wood is being burnt to cook the food. Here she was searching for the cheap hotels and came here. When she rang me and was waiting outside, someone fired at her two times. One bullet hit the side of her left shoulder. And the other on the ground. I have sent the men to search for the bullet outside.'

SP looked at Nalini, and she smiled. Then he asked, 'How did you know that he was attacked by his friends?'

'It is simple, sir. I know a little bit about reading the face and eyes. When I checked his eyes, I told the inspector.'

'Why are you interested in this case? And you started the investigation and got hurt?'

'Instinct, sir. I thought, why should I not find out about the man who was murdered? And see, we have found narcotic and counterfeit notes of five hundred denominations from here. Notes were packed inside the sheet of foam. I was thinking of asking the inspector to tear the sheet of the foam and see what else we can find there.'

ASP came forward and held the foam in one hand and tore the sheet. Several bundles of Rs. 500/- and Rs. 100/- fell on the bed. They were all surprised. SP took a Rs. 500/- note, checked it and said, 'Sir, this seems to be counterfeit.'

A constable came and said, 'Sir, we have found two bullets.' And he extended them to the inspector. The inspector took them and said, 'I will send them to the forensic expert.' Then he said to the receptionist, 'I will seal this room till they are arrested.'

SP said, 'You take all these items under your custody and seal both rooms. Now show me the drug.'

'Sir I have not opened the suitcase. The key is not available.'

He roared, 'Break the lock.'

ASP went to the suitcase and, with the help of a screwdriver, opened it. Ladies' dresses were lying in it. He took out the clothes, and then his eyebrow went up to his temple. There were two polyethene bags filled with drugs. He took one bag and showed it to the SP. He was also surprised and came near to ASP and said, 'My God, they might be supplying drugs here.'

Nalini said, 'Sir, don't touch them. There might be fingerprints. We should get it checked by forensic staff.'

They kept the drug packets in the suitcase. Then Nalini asked the receptionist, 'Have you got their Aadhar cards photocopies?'

'Yes.' He said with some hesitation.

'Bring them, all three. We want to see them/'

He hurriedly went out. The inspector closed the suitcase and told a constable to keep it in the jeep along with the money. He took the suitcase, and the other constable took the money. Then they saw the big purse. The inspector opened the purse. There were some notes of a hundred rupees. They were all counterfeit notes. There was a comb, powder, two sets of hair, and four masks. The inspector handed all to ASP. He checked and passed to SP. SP also checked and told the inspector to take the statement of all and then seal both the rooms. Then he turned to Nalini and asked, 'Where do you live?'

She gave her address.

'You had come to meet your friend. But now I think you will have to remain here till the case is finalised.'

'This will be my pleasure. But first thing, the inspector must go to the beaches that are nearby. He should ask all the people showing the photos of these men and the lady. Whether anyone had seen them.'

‘Yes, he will do that.’ SP said politely, ‘Even he will put his men at the airports and bus stands.’

The receptionist brought the three sheets of Aadhar cards’ photostat copies and handed them to ASP. He checked the names. The lady’s name was Namita. The man who was murdered was Samir, and the other partner was Mukesh.

SP said, ‘Now we will trace them. But from where had they found the drug?’

‘Sir, there are two options: either they were supplying here, or they had bought it here.’

SP looked at her and said, ‘Now you go and get proper medication.’

‘Sir, I will go home and ask my friend to take me to a doctor. Because I don’t know any doctor here.’

SP said to the inspector, ‘You first take her to some doctor and get her treated, and then drop her off at her home.’ The inspector nodded and started taking statements.



(7)

When Nalini reached home, Adarsa and Neeti had not arrived after taking their parents to the hospital. The time was approximately five in the evening. She prepared the tea and roasted two bread pieces. She brought all to the drawing room and started munching on toast and drinking tea. Her shoulder was cleaned, and medicine was applied by the doctor. He also inserted one injection and gave medicine for five days. The bullet was passed, touching her arm narrowly. Initially,

there was pain, but now the pain is very little. It was painful only when she was raising her left hand. She jerked her head and thought, why was he murdered? Had he been murdered by his partner and the lady? Or has some other person killed him? What connection do they have with that hotel? From where they get the drugs? They were taken from the supplier or brought here to supply. Is there any possibility that the manager of the Seaside hotel is also involved?

She came to the door when she heard the ring of the doorbell. She got up and opened the door. Neeti, along with her in-laws there. She smiled and opened the door. In the meantime, Adarsa also came.

‘What happened, Neeti? Got them checked?’

‘Yes.’ Neeti entered the room along with her in-laws and said, ‘Mamma is quite okay. She is having gastroenteric acid level is very much. It is hyper Acidity. This strikes towards the left side of the lungs, and one thinks that the heart is giving trouble. The doctor had prescribed some medicines to reduce the acidity.’

‘What about the ECG?’

‘It was normal.’

‘Thanks, God. Nalini said. Adarsa came to Nalini and said, ‘Didi, you know, what the doctor told to Mamma. He said that she should not worry about anything. But she should reduce the intake of the tea. Eat more fruits, like apples and bananas, and drink coconut water. It will reduce the acidity.’

Nalini said, ‘It is very simple, from today we should start this.’

Their parents were sitting there. Neeti brought water for them. They drank. Her mother-in-law said, ‘Neeti, I will reduce my addiction to tea from tomorrow morning. But just now, I want some tea, please.’ And she looked at her face. Her father-in-law laughed and said, ‘She can leave everything, but she cannot leave the tea.’

Suddenly, Adarsa noticed the bandage on the shoulder of Nalini and asked with worry, 'Didi, what happened to your shoulder?'

All looked at her. Neeti also came to her. Nalini laughed and lied, 'Nothing. I was going to the upper side road from that hotel's side road just to see the area. Then I saw that there was a fight between three or four men near a small hotel. Men were gathered to look at them. I also stood on the road. Suddenly, a man who was fighting took out a pistol and first fired into the air. All panicked and ran behind a table on the other side of the road. I also ran and hid behind the table. He again fired, and the bullet hit the side of my shoulder. In the meantime. The police came and arrested them. Then the inspector took me to a doctor for treatment and dropped me here.'

'But why did you go that side?' Adarsa said, 'There are cheap hotels and notorious people are roaming and fighting each other. But are you okay? Otherwise, I will take you to a doctor.'

'No, I am okay. See, I have prepared tea and toast for myself.'

'But never go to any unknown place. If you want to go, then go only to Marine Drive.' Neeti said.

'Okay, Baba, I will not go now.' She assured them.

Neeti brought the tea and took her old cup. The tea in the cup became cold. They all started drinking.



(8)

The next day, early in the morning, the inspector reached to her house. Adarsa greeted him and told him to sit. Adarsa was preparing

for the office, and Neeti was busy preparing his breakfast and lunch. Nalini was taking a bath. The inspector sat on the sofa and waited.

Nalini came after fifteen minutes. She said with a smile, 'Hello, sir. What is the matter? You have come so early.'

'I wanted to know about your health. I thought of taking you to the doctor for a dressing.'

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She laughed and said, 'I am fine, sir. You need not worry.' She sat on a sofa in front of him and asked, 'Any progress, sir?'

'Not yet. Last night we checked the beach. But we couldn't find anyone who saw them.'

'You might have checked only one beach?'

'Yes, only one.'

She kept mum for some time. Neeti brought two cups of tea and wished the inspector. The inspector stood and greeted her by folding both hands. When she was gone, both started drinking tea. At that time, Adarsa came with his backpack and a small bag from his lunch box and said, Didi, I am going to the office. Do you like to come with me? I will drop you off at the doctor.'

Immediately, the inspector said, 'You are going to the office? You can go. I will take her to the same doctor and drop her here.'

Adarsa looked surprisingly at him and said, Okay, Didi, then I will go.' Neeti also came after him and, when Adarsa went out, she closed the door.

After drinking tea, both came out. The inspector was alone. He drove the jeep. After dressing, she insisted on dropping her off near the beach. When she got out of the jeep, the inspector handed her three sheets of Aadhar cards. She took and kept them in her purse.

The inspector left, and she went to there where the labourers were seen. When she reached there, she found that the lady was preparing the rice and talking to the children. Nalini stood there with a smile. The lady looked at her and shied. Then the lady laughed. Both the children were looking questioningly at them. Then Nalini asked, 'Can I ask you a question? If you don't mind?'

She shyly nodded. Nalini asked, 'I will show you some photos. Please look at them and tell me if you have seen them at night here?' She showed her photocopies of those men and the lady. She saw the photos for some time, and said, 'No, I have not seen. For the last six days, I have had a headache. Sleep early. Her elder son came near to them and looked at the photos and said to her mother, 'Mom, you know five days back, when we were playing on the beach, and you came to call us. Mom, at that time, there were two men, and a lady was fighting with them. It seems the lady was one of them.'

'Yes, I went to call them. But I didn't see them.'

'Mom, they were there where we threw the burnt coal and dust.'

'We generally throw it in the night after taking our dinner. We all throw.'

'Mom, Ramu and Kishan had also seen them.'

'I don't know, maybe due to my headache.'

Nalini asked the boy, 'Boy, did you hear what they were talking to each other?'

The boy didn't say anything. Nalini asked, 'What were they holding in their hands or at their backs?'

'One who was a stout man had a bag on his back, and one bag was lying on the sand. The lady was standing by the side of that man, facing the sea. The other man, who was standing near the sea facing them, was shouting and abusing them with vulgar words.'

‘Then what happened there?’ Eagerly asked Nalini.

‘The Mom called us, and we came back.’

Nalini was dejected and looked at the woman and asked, ‘You didn’t notice anything?’

‘No, I was having a headache, a terrible headache. I prepared rice with difficulty.’

Nalini looked at her for some time. Then she handed a hundred-rupee note to the boy and said, ‘This is for you and your brother. If you remember anything, then keep it in your mind. I will come in the evening. At that time, you can tell me. Okay?’

The boy smiled and took the note. His mother asked, ‘Why are you giving money?’

‘He had given me valuable information. I am searching for them. Now I know that they have come here. What is the name of this boy?’

‘My name is Monu, and my brother’s name is Somu,’ The boy with a smile said.

‘Okay Monu, can you show me the place where they were standing?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then come with me and show the place.’ Monu looked at his mother. She nodded, and he ran to the beachside. Nalini also came down to the beach. The boy walked to the right side up to 20 feet and stood near the sea. He said, ‘One man was standing here facing away from the sea.’ Then he went two steps away from the sea and stood in one place, turned facing the sea and said, ‘One man was standing here having a bag on his back. He marched two steps to the left and said,’ The lady was here with a bag and a purse. They were fighting. There was one more bag kept between those men.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I have seen them when a car light fell on them.’

Nalini saw towards the road. It was not possible that light would fall here. She doubtfully said, ‘But a car light cannot fall here from the road.’

He said, ‘When the car comes from the top of the hill, the car light falls here from the roadside. If you come in the evening, when it is dark, you can see.’

Nalini thought for a moment and said, ‘Okay Monu, now you can go.’

The boy ran towards his mother. Nalini checked the spot minutely. She found some coal particles and dust at the bank. Some of it was not washed as they were inserted in the sand due to the people walking on it. She saw some men and women sitting on the parapet wall by the side of the road. There were some other men also taking lunch from the local vendor. Some taxi drivers were also seen there. She checked the time. It was noon. She went to that side and reached there. There was a gap in the wall. She came to the roadside. After some hitch. She asked a man who was having lunch sitting on the wall. She asked him, ‘You take lunch here?’

Initially, he looked at her face and said, ‘I take lunch and dinner here only.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Here only.’

‘What do you mean? You haven’t got any house....your wife?’

‘I have got no home. This is my house.’ And he laughed. Some men looked at him and told Nalini, ‘He is a madman. Roam alone

here and there. This vendor is very kind to him. He gives food to him in the daytime and evening. He remains here only.'

Nalini said, 'But he seems very gentle and calm. I was thinking of asking for some information from him, about three people.'

'Who are they?' A taxi driver sitting at one side asked.

She took out the Aadhar card photos and handed them to him, and said, 'The phone of my friend is switched off. He rang me and told me that they were in the Seaside Hotel, so I went there. The receptionist told me that they had left. Now, I am searching for them.'

He looked at the photos for some time and said, 'I cannot recognise them. Then he called the other taxi drivers and showed them. But no one had seen them. Then he called a taxi driver who had just arrived, and went to the vendor's shop. He purchased a cigarette for himself, burned it and started smoking. He smoked for some time and then threw the balance and came near them and asked, 'What is the matter?'

The taxi driver was holding the Aadhar cards, extended them to him and asked, 'Have you seen them? Or you might have given them a lift?'

He checked all three photos for some time and, with surprise, said, 'I know only this lady and this man. I will never forget this lady.'

'How do you know them?' Asked Nalini.

'They had cheated me. They hired a taxi at about eight at night from here, only for Borivalli. I took them. They were fighting with each other in the taxi. They got down at a crossing. The lady asked for the fare. I told her that she should pay me Rs. 250/ She paid me Rs 300 and said to keep the change. I was happy and thought of taking some sweets for the children. I purchased sweets from a well-known shop and paid him one hundred notes. The shop owner told me that

it is a counterfeit note. I was surprised and showed him the other two notes. They were also counterfeit. The shop owner said that you are a regular customer, so I will not call the police. But in future, be alert and check the money before keeping it in the pocket.'

Nalini asked eagerly, 'Had you seen their faces?'

'What face? I had seen them very well. I will never forget them.' He said furiously.

'At which crossing do you drop them?'

He looked with surprise at her and asked, 'Why do you want to know?'

The taxi driver who handed the photocopies said, 'They are her friends and are searching for them.'

Nalini immediately said, 'No, they are not my friends. I lied to you. I am working on behalf of the police. They had murdered their one friend.'

All looked at her with disbelief, and that driver furiously said, 'Now you are lying, ma'am. Now I will call the police.' Then he told all the drivers to stop her if she wanted to run from here.'

They all surrounded her, and she smiled. The madman stood on the wall and started laughing and clapping. Within fifteen minutes, the jeep arrived. The inspector got out of the jeep with two constables. The taxi driver went to him, saluted and said, 'Sir, she is one of them. Her friends gave me counterfeit notes of Rupees one hundred. They had gone to Borivally. She initially said that they were her friends, but now ignoring.'

Nalini came from that side of the wall. The inspector looked at her and, with surprise, asked while folding his hands, 'Ma'am, you are here?'

‘Yes, Inspector, I was searching for those two. He is the driver who dropped them at Borivally Crossing. You take him and see that place. Then we will search that side. You see, they are using the counterfeit 100-rupee notes. They cheated him.’

The inspector turned to him and asked, ‘Where had you dropped them?’

All were surprised that the inspector knew her and gave her preference over them. The taxi driver gasped and narrated the whole story to him, and told him that he had left them at the crossing.

The inspector asked, ‘Show me the notes?’

He took out the notes and handed them to him. The inspector checked and handed them to Nalini and said, ‘Ma’am, these are the same type of notes as we have found there.’

Nalini also checked and, with a smile, said, ‘It means they might be having notes in their backpack or purse. They might be using them when one is in a hurry. Here also I found a boy who had seen them at the side of the sea. And they were fighting with each other at about seven in the evening. At that time, the children were playing there. I found the coal dust at that point. The dust is still there. I have seen some footprints, but I don’t think they will match. Now we should search for those two.’

‘I will go and check the place where he dropped them.’

Suddenly, that madman laughed and said, ‘He went swimming. They held him to swim. He was crying while swimming.’

Everyone laughed and rebuked him to shut his mouth. Don’t you know the police are here?’

But Nalini went to him and asked, ‘Do you sleep the whole night here?’

He looked bewildered. Then Nalini asked the vendor, 'Had you seen him? Did he lie the whole night here?'

The vendor said, 'I keep my shop open till ten or eleven at night. He lies there, sings, laughs, and sometimes runs on the beach from one side to the other side. When I call him to take the food, he returns here, and I give him the leftover items to eat, and then I go.'

'It means he had seen something that we will ask when he is normal. Inspector, sir, do you want to take the statement of that boy?'

'They will not go anywhere. First, we should check the place where he had dropped them. They might be living there.'

Nalini checked the time. It was about twelve of the day. She decided to go. She called his taxi driver and told him to wait there. She sat in the other taxi, and he started it. The inspector and constables followed the taxi in their jeep.

Within twenty minutes, they reached the crossing from where a road led towards the Nepean Hillside Road. The taxi driver stopped the taxi. The jeep also arrived, and the inspector and constables got out and came near the taxi. Nalini and the driver also came out. The driver said, 'I have dropped them here and she paid me here.'

Nalini asked him, 'Had you seen which way they had gone?'

He said, 'When I was turning my taxi, I saw that they were turning towards the Nepean Hillside Road. '

Nalini said, 'Inspector, sir, 'This is a hilly area, all private buildings up to the top of the hill. There may also be some shops. How would we be able to trace them?'

Nalini again said, 'Sir, this will be done tomorrow. But today, you put your men with Aadhar card photos and ask every house and shop about them. We would have to trace them.'

‘That I will do. There is a police chowki in the Shimla House area. I will meet the Chowki in-charge and put them on the job.’

‘It will be better. Now I am going back, and you take further action.’

‘How will you go?’

‘I will take this taxi up to the seaside. My taxi is waiting there. Then I will go home.’

‘Okay, Ma’am.’ He said, and then he asked the taxi driver to take her back. She sat in the taxi and the driver started and moved. They reached near the beach and stopped near the vendor’s shop. She got out of the taxi and paid him. He was reluctant to take the money, but Nalini forced him to take it. The madman was sleeping on the wall. Some people were standing nearby the shop. There was no taxi. She called her taxi driver and told him to come near the shop. When the taxi arrived, she sat and asked him to take her home.



(9)

When she reached home, Neeti was very furious. She asked when she opened the door, ‘Where were you? You went with that inspector for your medicine. Now, you are returning home. Just see the time. It is almost 1.30 in the afternoon. Where were you?’

‘Sorry, Neetu. I went to the beach and sat there. There I felt pleasant and forgot the time.’ Nalini apologised.

‘You could have phoned me. I was very much worried about your health.’

‘Sorry. Now I will keep this in mind. How are uncle and aunt?’

‘They just had their lunch and now they are sleeping. You change your dress. In the meantime, I will warm the food.

Both started their lunch. While eating, Neeti asked her, ‘What is the reason, Nalini? That inspector is very much respecting you?’

‘Nothing.’ Nalini smiled and said, ‘I was hurt in my arm by a bullet. So, he is sympathising.’

‘I don’t think. There might be something secret between you two.’

Nalini laughed and said, ‘Don’t think like that. I have seen who shot the second shot. He takes me to that spot as he is investigating the case. But that man had run away from the hotel. He checked the room and found counterfeit notes of 100 and 500 rupees. So, I have seen the man, he takes me to recognise that man when he has doubts about someone. You also be careful while taking change from anyone.’

‘You should not have told him.’ Neeti said with some annoyance. ‘Now he will be after you.’

Nalini smiled and said, ‘I don’t think he will fire on me. First, he will save himself as the police are after him.’

After finishing lunch, Nalini said to Neeti, ‘You promise me, you will not tell all this to Aadarsa. He will fire on me.’

‘Why should I not tell him? He should know all this.’

Nalini politely said, ‘Please, Neeti. At the proper time, I will tell him. Even, I will give you full details. Keep it up for only one week.’

‘It means you are planning to go out?’

‘I must. I will tell you everything within a day or two.’ Nalini said, ‘Now I want to take some rest. I will go after the tea when you prepare for Uncle and Aunt.’

‘But promise me you will ring me if you are late.’

‘I promise you. Now let me take some rest.’ Then she lay on the sofa and closed her eyes. But she couldn’t sleep. Her mind started thinking about the case. What Monu had said and what the madman was saying while laughing. She thought to meet him when he is alone and normal. The inspector Gokhale has also not called. What did he find at the Shimla Chowki? She thought to call him. But she didn’t want to call from home. Hearing all this, Neeti may be annoyed. She again closed her eyes

AT four in the evening, the uncle and Auntie got up. She heard them coughing, so she went to their room, touched their feet and asked about their health. Auntie was sitting on the bed and said, ‘Now, I feel better. The day after tomorrow, Adi will take me to the doctor. He will prescribe some medicines after the checkup. Then we will go back to Poona.’

‘Why do you want to go Poona? You should remain here for one or two months and get yourself treated.’

Neeti came and said, ‘The same thing I am telling them. But they are adamant.’

Uncle said, ‘Beta, our work is suffering there.’

‘What work?’ Nalini asked. But he was silent. Neeti said, ‘They have one shop there by the side of the road. They sell pens, copies, pencils and some eatables. He doesn’t want to leave it. So many times, Adarsa had suggested leaving all this and live with them. But he did not agree with that.’

She went to the kitchen. Nalini said, ‘Why are you making them annoyed? You should agree.’

After a pause, the uncle said, ‘You know beta, there I had got friends. I can talk to them. She also has many friends. She walks and

chats with them. At an old age, a man or a woman needs the company of their age group. This influences the energy and mind. Here, Adarsa must go to the office, and he has no time to talk. Neeti does the homework and sometimes goes to the market to make a purchase. She has no time to sit and chat with us. Now she is better, and we can go to Poona. I request you, please apprise them about this.'

Nalini thought for some time. Her thoughts went back to her school days. She also liked her friends. If anyone is on leave, she feels lonely. Then she said, 'Okay, uncle, I will try to convince them. Now you will be happy.'

Neeti brought the tea, and they drank in that room.

When Nalini came out, it was just five in the evening. She hired a taxi and went to the spot where Monu was living. She got out of the taxi and went to the top where Monu was living. She saw that the fire was burning in five places. Men were taking buckets and big bottles to fetch the water from the roadside pipe. The children were playing on the beach.

'The lady looked at her and smiled. Nalini asked her, 'How are you now?'

'Better.' She said with a shy.

Nalini asked, 'I told Monu that I would come in the evening to meet him. Where is he?'

'Yes, they are playing on the beach. Should I call them?'

'No, I will go and ask them. The other ladies were also looking at her in surprise. She went to the beach. Monu recognised her and said, 'You have come again?'

'Yes, I want to ask something to Ramu and Kishan. Where are they?' He shouted for Ramu and Kishan. When they reached there,

Monu introduced them to her. She put her hands on their head and asked, 'Four or five days ago, had you seen here, something unusual?'

They didn't say anything and looked at her face. Then Monu said, 'She is asking about those two men and the lady who were fighting with each other near the seashore.'

Ramu said, 'Yes, yes, they stood at the seashore and fought. The lady and the man were on that side, and the other man was towards the seaside. One bag was lying between them.'

'Had you seen their faces?'

'No, it was dark at that time.'

Suddenly, Kishan spoke in a loud voice. I had seen. I saw all of them.'

Nalini turned towards him and asked, 'How did you see? When it was dark?'

'We were running, and I went near to them to save myself. So that Monu could not catch me. While running, I struck the bag kept between them and fell.. The lady was annoyed and wanted to slap me. She came forward to catch me. But I got up and ran. At that time, the light of a car fell on them, and I saw their faces.'

Nalini showed them the photo of them. He immediately took a photo of the lady and said, 'This was the lady who shouted and wanted to slap me.'

'Did you see the other two men also?'

'I have seen but I don't recognise them as I ran from there to save myself from that lady.'

'Okay, Kishan. Thank you very much. I will meet you later.' Then she went to the vendor's shop side. That madman was sitting on the wall and was singing a song. There was no one at that time. She went

to him and kept her hand on his shoulder. He stopped the song and looked at Nalini. Nalini smiled. He might have recognised her. He stood with a jerk and came down and stood on the sand. Nalini said, 'I came to meet you in the morning. At that time, you said that the man was swimming in the sea. Is this correct?'

He laughed and ran towards the beach. Then he indicated for her to come down. She went near him. He ran from there to the left side of the beach. Nalini looked at him with surprise and thought, 'He is a madman. Why is she wasting time with him?'

The madman stood at one point near the seashore and indicated for her to come. She walked confusedly up to him and stood near him. He laughed and said, 'He swam here. The man submerged himself in the water. The lady held his legs. He was flying like a crow. Then he started swimming like a fish. He was crying, but the man helped him to swim. After some time, he started swimming, and he was gone. Ha..ha ha..ha. He was very nicely gone, like a fish.'

'What about those two?'

'Gone..gone, through that way to the top. Ha, ha ha.' Then he started laughing and dancing. After some time, he said, 'That man swam and went into the sea, very far.'

Nalini left him and came to the top. Then she rang the inspector Gokhale. When he picked, she asked about the progress from the Shimla House Chowki. He dejectedly said, 'Ma'am, they are unable to trace them. Though they have checked twice. There are many shops up to miles on both sides of the road. But they were not able to know about them.'

'Then they might have run away from Mumbai?'

'I don't think. We have increased our security at all the places and installed the check posts at all the crossings, and police have been sounded.'

Nalini thought for a second and asked, 'That area is Nepean Hillside Road. Then where is Malabar Hill?'

'That whole area is called the Malabar Hill area.'

Nalini, with disgust, asked, 'Then what should be done?' Nalini asked and further said, 'I am at the seaside where we were in the morning. I met that madman. He took me to the seashore. He had seen those men and women throwing their partner's body in the sea. They held him and submerged his face into the sea water, and he died of suffocation.'

'Wao.' The inspector said, 'But he would not be able to give the statement. His statement will not be accepted in the court as he is a madman. When we arrest them, then only the facts will be known.'

'But at least we know that he was murdered.' Nalini said and decided to go and meet the police at Shimla House Chowki. She said, 'Tomorrow morning I want to go to the Nepean Hillside Road and meet the in-charge of the Shimla House Chowki. You please sound them to help me.'

'Okay, Ma'am. I will do that.'

Then she disconnected the call. She hired a taxi and went home.



(!0)

The next day she reached at Shimla Police Chowki. She met the in-charge, Hav. Kamat. He greeted her. After tea, she asked, 'Had you checked thoroughly in all the shops and residential houses?'

He replied, 'I had checked with my staff at all the houses and shops. But nobody saw them.'

Should we check again?' Nalini said, 'I want to check personally that area. They are carrying counterfeit notes and drugs. Is there anyone who sells Ganja in small quantity.'

'Yes, there are some shops that sell paan masala, tobacco and cold drinks on the roadside.'

'Then come. We will go and meet them. Maybe we can get something from them.'

Hav. Kamat agreed. There was no vehicle at the police chowki. She took them in her taxi. Hav. Kamat was guiding them. Within fifteen minutes, they reached the Nepean Hillside Road, and Kamat stopped the taxi near a roadside shop. Nalini got out and told the Hav. Kamat to take the taxi at a distance from the shop. When the taxi went away from the shop, Nalini went to the shop and asked, 'What items do you have here?'

He said, 'Madam, paan, paan masala and like that.'

She whispered, 'Are you having that thing also?'

'What thing?'

Nalini bent near to him and said, 'Ganja.'

The vendor also whispered, 'No, madam. I don't keep that.'

Nalin's face was saddened, and she whispered as if talking to herself, 'How will I survive now. I am not able to move...what will I do now? I should look for the other paan wala.'

The vendor heard, and for a second, he looked at her and all around. There was no one at that time. He signalled to her and called her to his shop. When she reached at his shop, he stood from his stool and bent towards her and said in a whispering tone, 'Madam, I can help you. Look at that big shop on the other side of the road. She saw a big shop on the downside of the road. Many customers were seen

going inside and coming out after purchasing items. She nodded. The vendor said to her, 'You go there and ask anyone about Mahesh Paranjape. When you meet him, tell him that Somu Paranjape has sent you. He will arrange a little for you. But it is very costly.'

Her face brightened. She thanked him and said, 'I am going to die if I don't get it.'

Somu Vender smiled, and she left the place. Hav. Kamat wanted to follow her when she signalled him to wait. She reached into the shop. It was a big shop. All the items were properly arranged. She looked at the shop for some time and then stood near the cash counter, asking the manager, I want to meet Mahesh Paranjape. Where is he?

The manager looked at her for some time and asked, 'Why do you want to meet him?' His tone was suspicious.

She looked sharply at him. Bent over the counter and said slowly, 'Somu Paranjape had sent me to meet him.'

The manager shied and called Mahesh, who was lean and thin, with a small moustache. He came to the manager and looked at him. The manager told him something in his language.

Then he looked at her and asked, 'How much do you want? One gram costs about five hundred rupees.'

'I want at least ten grams. But I need it immediately; otherwise, I will die. Since morning, I have not taken. My head is going to blast.' And she rubbed her head.

'Pay the amount to the Manager.' He whispered and didn't speak in a higher tone.'

Nalini paid the amount to the manager. The manager said, 'Take her and satisfy her and let her go from outside Rute.'

Mahesh took her outside and turned to the right side of the shop. Nalini followed him. There was a small door at the end of the shop, which seemed to lead to an underground room. He opened the door and entered. There was a small room. Old furniture was piled. He took her from the back side. There, he turned on the light and told Nalini to wait. He went further, where a half-broken almirah was kept. He opened the almirah shutter and took out ten poly bags of a small size. He brought them and handed them to Nalini and said, 'One packet has one gram. Do you want to check?'

'No, I want to put it in my mouth. It will freshen me.' She smiled and opened one packet, put a little in her mouth and with joy said, 'Aha, now I am feeling that I have survived. Thanks. Then, she kept the packets in her purse and handed a hundred-rupee note to him. He took the money and said, 'Whenever you require this, please come to me.

'Thanks she said, and both came out. Mahesh said to her, 'Now you go straight to the main road. If your friends also need it, bring them to me.

She again thanked him and came to the main road. While passing from the waiting taxi, she signalled Hav. Kamat to follow. When she reached a comfortable distance, she sat in the taxi. Then she said, 'I got the place that sells narcotics like Ganja. You won't be able to handle them. So, I think, we should call the inspector Gokhale with more constables to arrest them.'

'But they may run away?' Kamat said.

'No, they will not. We will wait at the Chowki. On the way, she rang Inspector Gokhale and narrated how she found the shop selling the Ganja. She told him to come with more constables. Some of them should have the guns. The inspector assured her that he would be reaching out soon.

The taxi reached the Shimla Police Chowki, and all got out. Hav. Kamat called for the tea and some eatables. The inspector reached within half an hour, along with ten constables. Three of them were carrying guns. There was a Sub-Inspector who was carrying a pistol. They came in a van.

Hav. Kamat wanted to arrange for the tea, but the inspector declined it and eagerly said, 'It is 11.30, we should not waste the time. We should move and take a look at the shop.'

Nalini agreed and said, 'Inspector, sir, you come with me in the taxi, and the sub-inspector will follow us. Kamat will sit in the taxi at the front seat.'

They all agreed and accordingly sat. They reached to the shop and stopped on the road as vehicles could not go up to the shop when the constables got down. Seeing so many police, the nearby men and women gathered on the road. The constables asked them to go away. Though they backed a little, they looked eagerly at them.

Then, Nalini led them towards the entrance door of the shop and asked a few constables to watch on the right side of the shop. As she went further to open the door, a fire was heard from the right side of the shop. The sub-inspector ran towards the right side and saw that a constable had been hit by a bullet on his thigh. Another constable was lying on the floor and looking at the garage side. He indicated to the sub-inspector about a man hiding in the garage. The sub-inspector looked to that side. The door of the garage was slightly open. One man was seen there. Suddenly, he fired with a pistol again. The bullet passed from near the ear of the sub-inspector. He lay down on the floor. Again, the face of that man was seen. He was lean and thin. The sub-inspector fired at him with his pistol. But the bullet struck the garage shutter. Then the door shutter was closed by that man. The sub-inspector stood and ran to the garage door. The other constable, who

was carrying a gun, also ran and went to the garage. The sub-inspector pushed the shutter, but it was bolted from the inside.



(11)

Nalini pulled the door of the shop, and it opened. But she was surprised. No one was there. The manager and the salesmen were not seen. The shop was empty. The inspector was also surprised to see the shop all around. They both had a round and were checked thoroughly. But no one was there. The room was a square type, and all the walls except the front wall had wooden racks. All the racks were filled with different types of items for sale.

Nalini asked, 'Where are they?' It is not lunchtime.'

The inspector said, 'Even customers are not seen.' Nalini came to the cash counter and checked the drawers. Cash was kept in different denominations, and change was also kept properly. She took a 100/- and a 500/- note and checked. She took more notes. When she checked them, she smiled and said, 'Sir, see the practical idea. The counterfeit notes of 100/ and 500/- have been mixed nicely one over the other. If someone checks, they can say 'sorry' and blame someone for cheating.'

The inspector nodded and asked, 'There might be some customers. Where they had gone. We have not seen anyone going out.'

'But how did they know that we were going to raid here?' Nalini asked. Then she thought about the paan wala Somu Paranjape. She called the Hav. Kamat said, 'You please go and if that paan wala is there and bring him here.'

Hav. Kamat immediately went out.

‘There might be some way to go out.’ The inspector said, ‘We should find the way.’

‘You are right, sir. Let us check.’ She said and came out from the counter. Then she said to the inspector, ‘Get rid of all these racks from the wall. Then we will check.’

In the meantime, Hav. Kamat came and said, " Ma'am, that paan Wala is not there.’

‘But he was there in the morning?’ Nalini said with surprise.

‘Yes, his shop is open, but he is missing. I asked the men there who saw him if he left the shop when he saw the police. When one of them asked, he gave a vague reply and went towards the Shimla House side.’

‘It means he is absconding. He might have seen me.’

The inspector nodded. Then they all spread and started searching for the hidden door. Some constables tried to push the racks. But they were properly embedded in the wall. Suddenly, Nalini remembered the basement room. ‘It means there should be one more room at the back side, and the door should be at the back side of this room.’ Thinking all this, she started searching for something on that side. The inspector also started searching on that side. Nalini noticed at one side, a few small packets were hanging on the wooden rack. She unconsciously pushed it aside. Then she was surprised to see a double wooden vertical rail. The wooden planks were fixed to it to make small racks, and on the other side, the planks were fixed to the other vertical rail. She saw hinges on the vertical rail and two hooks on the other side rail, closing the door. She showed it to the inspector. He went to her and saw the trick made by the shop owner. She took out all the hooks and tried to push. But it didn’t budge. Then she tried to pull. The complete rack opened like a door, and there was an opening in the wall. There was darkness inside. The inspector wanted to go inside

when Nalini said, 'Don't be in a hurry, sir. They might have arms. Take out your pistol.'

He took out his pistol and asked the two gunmen to cover him and went inside the room. It was completely dark. He searched for the switch on the wall and found it. He put it on. When the room was lighted, they found that the room was empty. Some cardboard boxes were kept there. A man opened the cardboard boxes and found that some materials, as seen on the racks, were in the boxes. The inspector went straight to the backside. There was also a door. He opened it. And found that the opening is towards the backside road. Helplessly, he looked at the face of Nalini. Nalini laughed and said, 'So they had escaped from this route. The customers had also gone from this side.'

Now, we should go to the back of this building and see what the sub-inspector had found. You please seal this shop.'

'The inspector said, 'I heard some firing. We must go and check.' Then Inspector Gokhale instructed his two constables about sealing the shop and came out of the shop. They went to the right side of the building. There was a big wall between the shop and the adjacent house. At the end, there was a garage. The shutters of the garage were closed. On the way, they saw a door on the basement. The door was closed and locked. A constable who was hit by a bullet was lying on the floor. But he was alive. They reached to the garage. They saw the sub-inspector and two constables with their guns. The sub-inspector said, 'Sir, one lean and thin man fired on us. The first bullet hit the thigh of the constable, and the second passed from near my ear. Now he is hiding in this garage and has closed the door. We are trying to open the lock by pushing it. But it is not opening.'

'There might be some way to go out?' Nalini asked.

'I don't think.'

'Had you heard any sound of moving?' Gokhale asked.

‘No, sir, nothing is heard.’

‘Then he might have escaped.’ The inspector said, ‘Let us get that door open.’

Nalini said with doubt, ‘This door can be opened outside. Pushing the door will not serve the purpose. Let us pull it.’

‘We are trying the same. But the bolt seems to be thick and long. So, we are not able to open it.’ The sub-inspector said nervously.

‘Don’t lose your nerve, sir. Now there are eight men, and we will also try to pull. Come on and pull the door. All held the shutter as there was a gap between the meeting of the two points. All pulled the shutter, including Nalini and the inspector. After five minutes, they saw that the bolt was bent a little. Again, they applied full pressure and pulled it. The bolt was twisted, and the shutter opened with force. Some of them fell on the floor. At that time, a fire was heard from inside. But it passed over their head without hurting anyone. That lean and thin man was Mahesh Paranjape, who tried to run out through the door. Nalini saw him and raised her leg. He struck her leg and fell on the floor. His pistol also fell. The sub-inspector stood and grabbed him in his arms. The blood was oozing from his mouth.

The sub-inspector said furiously, ‘So, you are hiding here? Very nice of you.’ And he slapped him. He started weeping. All stood up from the floor. The inspector went inside the garage and checked. It was empty.

When they came out, Nalini said, ‘He gave me Ganja from that room. Now we should check that room in his presence.’

Mahesh's hands were tied with a string, and they took him to that door. The sub-inspector checked his pocket and found a key ring with three keys. He opened the door and pushed Mahesh inside. Everyone entered, and Nalini told him to turn on the light. He led them to the wall and showed the switch. The sub-inspector turned on the light.

When the light was on, they saw old steel and wooden furniture lying haphazardly in the room. Nalini said, 'Now take him to the place where you brought the Ganja for me,' indicating a broken almirah at the far end. The sub-inspector, keeping him at the front, approached the almirah. He opened it and found an open cardboard packet. Surprised, he said, 'Sir, Ganja packets are here.' The inspector came to him, saw the packets, and remarked, 'So, you have stored and are supplying Ganja in small packets here.'

Nalini also went to him and saw and asked Mahesh, 'But there is only one box. What about the others?'

'We have only one box.' Mahesh said.

'I don't believe. So many customers need more. Tell the fact, Mahesh.' She said in a hard tone. But Mahesh didn't reply. The sub-inspector slapped him and said, 'Talk, mister, if you want to live. Otherwise, I will kill you.'

He was frightened and said, 'That only the manager knows.'

'He might have run away.' The inspector said in disgust.

Nalini asked, 'Was anybody living here? A lady and a stout man?'

He didn't reply. Nalini said to him, 'You didn't bother about yourself when you reached the police station. It is better to speak in front of them. This may save you from the torture.'

'I had not done anything. I was to give the material after the nod of the manager. He was arranging all this.'

'Where does he live?'

'At the back of the road was a big house.'

'What is his name?'

'Amar Nath Khandelwal.'

In the meantime, Nalini roamed between the furniture. When she reached at the other end of the room, she found a backpack lying under a broken table. There were also two empty plates and two water bottles. She immediately called the inspector. He hurriedly came to her. She showed him all the items and said, 'Someone was living here and might have run and left the backpack. It might be those two who murdered that man.'

The inspector first looked at the bag and then bent to open it. Nalini said, 'They might have purposely left this bag. They might have planted a bomb to kill us.' Nalini further said, 'Don't open this bag. You can call your men who are experts or the bomb squad.'

'They had to come from the Headquarters. It will take time. I can't wait till then. You all should go out. All went out. But Nalini bent at the back of a table. The inspector opened the bag, but nothing happened. He checked inside and saw a brown pack. He took out the packet and opened it. Nalini stood and came near to him. 'This may be Ganja.' She whispered, 'This may be Ganja as we had seen at Seaside Hotel.'

'Yes, you seem to be right.' And he opened the packet. It was Ganja wrapped in brown paper.

'It means they have been living here since that day when the taxi driver left them at the crossing.'

'You are right.' Nalini said, took a small piece on her finger, put it in her mouth and said, "Yes, it is Ganja. Now it is confirmed that they might have brought it from Delhi and are supplying here, and manager Khandelwal was further supplying to the needy customers at higher rates.'

He nodded, called the constable and handed the bag to him. Then they came out. She went to Mahesh and said, 'We have got the

proof that a man and a lady were sheltering here. Now tell us the truth. Did they live here?’

He again shivered and said, ‘Yes, one lady and one man were hiding here. But only in the night. They were leaving early in the morning and returning at about eight at night.’

‘Whether they were leaving their bags here only?’

‘The man was taking one backpack, and one backpack, and one purse was held by the lady.’

‘Are you sure that they were having only two bags?’

‘Yes, when they came, they were carrying three backpacks. They went to leave one backpack.’ The inspector asked, ‘Should we go to the manager’s house and arrest him?’

Nalini said, ‘I don’t think we will find him. He will not go to his house. He might go to a place where he can talk later when asked. But you depute your staff in civil dress to check if the lady and that man return. They went early in the morning, as told by Mahesh. They might not know about this happening. Give photos of them to your men.’

The inspector thought for a moment and then agreed and told Hav. Kamat said to do accordingly and said, ‘They should watch up to nine at night. Whoever comes and opens the door should be arrested. Then give me a call. In case no one comes, then also intimate me.’

The Hav. Saluted and said, ‘I will do it, sir.’

The cardboard box was kept in the van. The inspector said to Nalini, I will go from here in the van along with Mahesh. Please drop Hav. Kamat and his men to the Shimla house Chowki.’

She agreed and sat in the taxi along with them.



(12)

Nalini reached home at about 2.30 of the day. Neeti looked at her with annoyance. While entering the drawing room, Nalini asked, 'How are Uncle and Aunty?'

Neeti just shouted, 'Why are you worrying about them? You worry about your Inspector with whom you are roaming.'

'I am not roaming, Neetu. I am helping him.'

'Whatever you do, I don't mind. But I told you to ring me when you are late. Now you eat that cold food. We had it.' And she entered her bedroom.

Nalini threw her purse on the sofa and went into the room and said, 'Don't be annoyed with me, Neetu. I thought that I would be on time. But there was a traffic rush, and I was late.'

'Where were you?'

'Today I went to Malabar Hills. I wanted to see the area. I came to know that VIPs are living there. So, I thought of seeing that area. The houses were spread from the bottom to the top of the hill. The houses are constructed nicely, like the big kothies.'

'But you should have informed me?'

'I was mesmerised to see the area and buildings. From the top of the hill, the sea could be seen. I sat there for hours.'

The face of Neeti was normal then. She got up and, while going out, said, 'You change your dress. I, in the meantime, warn the food.'

Neeti went out, and Nalini smiled and went to the bathroom.



(13)

After lunch, she also lay with Neeti, and both started chatting with each other. When it was four in the evening, Uncle and Auntie got up. Both came out. Nalini went to their room and wished. The Uncle was sitting on the bed, and Auntie lay with support at the back, keeping two pillows at her back. She asked Nalini, 'Where were you? I have not seen you.'

Nalini said, Auntie, I went for a walk on the seaside. Uncle Seashore is so beautiful that I forgot the time and remained there for hours.'

'It looks very nice. Adi had shown us while coming to this place.' Uncle said.

'Why don't you come with me? I will show you. Nalini eagerly asked.

The Uncle said, 'I can walk. But she....I have a doubt.'

'What are you saying? I was not walking in Poona?' The Auntie refuted.

Nalini said, 'I will take her. After the tea, you will be ready. I will take you both to the front. There is a wall. You can sit there and watch the current of the sea.'

When tea was over, Nalini said to Neeti, 'I am taking Uncle and Auntie for a walk.'

But Neeti said, 'Mamma is not well. I will also come.'

Nalini said, 'Don't worry, Neetu. I will take care of Mamma. You remain here. Adarsa may come. He will feel bad when he doesn't find you at home.'

Neeti was still not sure about Mamma. But said nothing and nodded. They came out of the building and walked to the Marine Drive side. While crossing the road, Nalini and Uncle held her hands. When they reached there, both were very happy. They sat on the lower portion of the wall, and their faces were towards the sea. The seawater struck the stone boulders.

Aunty was excited to see the sea and its current. The Uncle was also looking at the sea. His face also brightened. Nalini sat by the side of Aunty and said, 'Aunty, you might be happy now.'

Aunty smiled and said, 'Today I am seeing a sea and its current. But I have seen on television that the people standing on the sand near the sea, and the current of water touches their feet. But here we can't go there.'

Nalini said, 'Today you have seen the sea. Tomorrow, I will show you the beach. You can go up to the seawater. There you can touch the water, and you will feel the water on your feet when the current ascends towards you.'

After some time, she took them for a walk on the footpath.

When they returned, it was evening. Adarsa had come from his office. His face looked worried. He asked, 'Where had you gone? I was very worried.'

Aunty said, 'Today Nalin showed us the sea.'

'But Mamma, you are very weak. You should take a rest at home.'

'Now I am okay, Adi. I thank Nalini for taking us for a walk in an open place. Look at the face of your Papa; his face is brightened now.'

Nalini smiled and said, 'They need some open space, Adarsa, because they are accustomed to going for a walk with their friends in

the morning and evening, as we like to go and meet our friends and talk with them.'

Adarsa turned and held on to the mother, but she left his hand and walked alone and sat on the sofa. Then she asked, 'Had you drunk the tea?'

'Not yet, Mamma. I just came from the office.'

Amma said to Neeti, 'Prepare tea for Adi and give a little to me also.'

Neeti looked at her, surprised and went to the kitchen without saying anything.

After dinner, they lay on their bed. Nalini's phone rang. It was the Inspector at the other end. When she said 'Hello'. Gokhale said, 'Ma'am, till 8.30 at night, no one came to that shop. No one came out of the manager's house. Then, my men went there to enquire about the Khandelwal. A lady opened the door and said that he had gone to Khandwa yesterday morning to meet his friend who was sick and admitted to the hospital. He will be back tomorrow. My men are still checking the houses in the locality today also.'

'But he was here in the morning.' Nalini said, 'He was the man to whom I paid the money.'

'Yes, this question was asked by our men, and she refuted it by saying that whenever he goes out, A senior supervisor sits in the manager's seat because he can not leave the customers when they are paying an amount in cash.' When asked about the name of the supervisor. She said that there are two supervisors. But she didn't know their names.'

'Okay. What about the paan wala Somu Paranjape?'

'He had been arrested. He lives in Hyderabad Colony in a small hut along with his wife. We came to know about him when we took

Mahesh to Shimla Chowki. Then we slapped Mahesh and asked about Somu. Then he told us his address. I sent the sub-inspector, and he brought him to the Chowki.'

'What did he say about the drugs?'

He is also a paddler. But he doesn't do it. He only guides the needy person to that shop and tells them to meet Mahesh. Mahesh is his co-brother.'

'You ask him about the manager. Whether he was here in the shop in the morning or some supervisor was sitting on the counter.'

'This I will ask him tomorrow morning. I had brought them here and put them in the lockup.'

'Any news about that lady and the man?'

'No, Ma'am, nothing.'

'Okay, I will try to come to your office in the morning.'

'Should I send the jeep?'

'No. I will come by taxi.'

Then she disconnected the call.



(14)

The next day, she reached the police station and met Inspector Gokhale and the sub-inspector in the chamber. They both stood when Nalini entered the room. She smiled and asked, 'Sir, had you asked them about the lady and the man?'

‘No, not yet. We wanted to ask in your presence. Come, we will go to the cell. They then went to the other room, which was converted into the cell. When the door was opened, Mahesh and Somu were sitting on the floor, keeping their backs against the side of the wall. They stood up when they entered the room. The face of Mahesh was swollen, and he was given aid. Both were seen as very nervous. Nalin went to him and politely said, ‘Mahesh, who was on the counter when I came in this morning?’

‘Manager, madam.’

‘When the manager goes out, then who sits on the counter?’

‘Madam, I sit on the counter.’

‘If you are also not there, then?’

‘Then Madho looks after.’

‘You both are supervisors?’

‘No. But we are seniors.’

‘It means yesterday Madho was on the counter. Because the manager had gone to Khandwa the day before yesterday.’

Mahesh was surprised and looked at Nalini and said, ‘Who said that he had gone to Khandwa? He was here only.’

Somu also said, ‘Madam, he was here only. He might have gone when the police arrived. I saw you with the police. I rang him and intimated that you had come with the police.’

Nalini looked at the inspector, and he nodded. Then she asked the Somu, ‘You are supplying drugs?’

‘No, madam, I only send the needy person to that shop. Because nowadays in this area, ladies and young men are accustomed to taking Ganja being cheap.’

‘You might be getting some profit?’

He lowered his head and nodded. Nalini said, ‘Okay. You tell me whether you know those two people who supply Ganja for you?’

Both looked at each other and lowered their heads. Nalini said, ‘So, you know them. What are their names?’

‘Maya and Shantanu.’ Both said.

‘Had you seen any other person with them?’

After some hitch, Mahesh said, ‘Previously, there were three. But this time, one man had not come. Only one lady and one stout man came. They seem to be afraid of something. When I asked, they said, ‘Police had arrested him. That bugger was paying with counterfeit notes at restaurants. The manager became suspicious when he saw the new notes of Rs. 500 and called the police. When we saw the police, we ran away. The police arrested him. Then we came here to hide.’

‘What was his name?’

‘Mohit.’

‘Any idea where they can go from here?’

Mahesh said, ‘I am not sure. They can go to the Seaside Hotel, or they may go to any chaal near the Devi Temple. There are many houses on that side. The owner gives them on rent daily.’

Nalini asked the inspector, ‘Where is the Devi Temple?’

The inspector said, ‘It is near the Marine Drive, but on the hillside road.’

Nalini thought for some time and said, ‘Now you depute your men in civil dress and check the chaal. I will join you later. What about that hotel?’

‘The room is still sealed.’ The sub-inspector said.

‘Had the manager approached to de-seal the room?’

‘No. He had not.’

Then they came to the inspector’s room, and he ordered for the tea.



(15)

In the evening, she again took her uncle and aunt to Marine Drive. She took them on the footpath at the far end, where the rush of the people was less. She got them to sit on the wall facing the sea. The sand of the sea was seen at a little distance from the stone boulders. Young boys descended on the boulders and landed on the sand. The bottom portion of their pants was wet. They were laughing and chatting. Uncle and Aunt enjoyed seeing them. After some time, Nalini turned towards the footpath and saw the ladies walking on it. They were laughing and chatting with their friends. Suddenly, her eyes met a lady with a veil. She was looking towards the roadside while sitting on the wall. She was carrying a backpack on her thigh and holding it with her arms. Her face was also covered with a veil. Though there were many Muslim girls, they had removed the veil from their faces.

Nalini thought, ‘Why is she wearing the veil on her face? And why is she holding the backpack tightly? Why was she looking at the roadside? Why is she not enjoying the sea? Nalini became suspicious of her. Then, Nalini thought to meet her and ask the reason. She told the uncle, ‘Uncle, you both sit here. There I had seen one of my friends. I will go and meet her. I will be back after ten minutes.’

‘Yes, you go. We are enjoying seeing those boys.’

She slowly went to that lady. She was looking for her left and right sides every time. A white car stopped at the parking space near the entrance gate. Two men got out of the car and entered the footpath, and stopped there. They looked all around. That lady removed her veil from her face, looked at them and smiled. Again, she put her veil over her face.

Nalini saw her face for a second and recognised her. Both men marched on the path on different sides. After going to a little distance, they returned towards the Maya. The left-side man walked back near Maya, and the right-side man moved to the edge of the path. She put her hand in the bag, pulled out a poly bag, and handed it to the man when he was near her. That man took the bag and went towards the gate. The other man, who was at the edge of the path, walked towards Maya. Maya put her hand in the bag. Nalini rushed to her and removed her veil from her face and said, ‘So, you are Maya. Delivering the Ganja. And she held her hand.

When the other man, who was coming from the gate, saw her, he took out his pistol and fired at Nalini. But missed the aim, and the bullet hit Maya on her left shoulder. She cried. The people sitting on the wall also cried, jumped from the wall and ran outside.

Nalini ran towards the car. But the car took a U-turn and moved to the right side of the road. Nalini shouted to the traffic constable to stop the wrong-side-going car and said, ‘They had fired on a lady. Please stop them.’

Hearing firing and shouting by Nalini, the traffic police whistled at the car, but it had gone very far. Then he shouted to a traffic policeman standing nearby to chase the car and come here.

Nalini came to Maya. Her bag was lying on the footpath, and she was holding her hand and crying. Nalini held her hand and removed

her veil from her face and tied it around her arm. The blood was oozing profusely from the arm. The traffic police also reached there and suggested taking her to a hospital. But Nalini said, 'No, we should call Inspector Gokhale. Then he will decide.'

The traffic police looked at her in surprise. Nalini said to him,

'You hold her hand. She might feel dizzy, and I will call the police.' He held her hand, and Nalini called the police inspector. Then she said to Maya, 'That is the result of choosing the wrong path. What did you think that you would never be caught? Now see the man whom you were supplying the Ganja had shot you, fearing that you would be arrested and speak about them.'

But she was not listening. She was crying in pain. The inspector arrived with four constables and an ambulance with a doctor and two nurses.

The inspector looked at her and asked, 'Who is she?'

Nalini smiled and said, 'You don't recognise her? She is Maya, one of the murderers.'

"What!"

He was surprised and looked thoroughly at her face, and then, after remembering, he said,

"How did you get her?"

"When Nalini told him all the details, he was frozen. The doctor and nurses took care of her; they removed the veil, and it seemed she was wearing a suit. The bullet had passed from the shoulder, and it might have hit inside the arm. The doctor said that they had to operate on it. The bullet was still inside. It had to be cleaned and done on priority; otherwise, poison could've spread, and then it would have been very difficult to save her life."

“Now, you take her to the hospital, and I will order the constables to guard her. I’ll be reaching out soon.”

The doctor nodded, and she was taken to the hospital. When they left, Nalini took her bag and opened it. There was one more packet of Ganja. She opened the side pocket; there were bundles of notes of Rupees 100/- and five hundred. They were all counterfeit notes. She showed all this to the inspector and kept it in the bag. Then she had a pocket on the other side of the bag. The 100/- and 500/- rupee notes were kept haphazardly. She checked the notes. They were genuine notes. She kept all in the bag and handed it to the inspector and said, ‘I will meet you tomorrow morning. Check with the traffic police whether they have arrested the two men who escaped in a car.’

‘When will you be reaching there?’

‘I will try to come at ten in the morning. Now I am going. I brought my uncle and aunt. Now I will take them back home. ‘Then she turned and walked towards them.



(16)

The next day, she went to the police station and met with the inspector. She asked him, ‘Now, how is Maya?’

‘She is better now. The bullet had been removed and sent to the forensic expert.’

‘Had you taken her statement?’

‘The sub-inspector had gone there to take her statement.’

‘I also want to ask about her partner, Shatanu. Where is he hiding? She might know.’

‘Madam, let us go.’ And he narrated all this to my SP and ASP. They want to meet you.’

‘I will meet them. But first, I want to meet Maya. If we are late, then she might abscond, and the case might remain half solved.’

‘Okay then. Let us go.’ The inspector stood from his chair, and both came out. When they reached the hospital, she was lying on a bed in a separate room. Two constables were standing at the door. The sub-inspector was inside with a nurse. The sub-inspector was sitting on a chair near her bed and reading her statement in a loud voice. As the inspector entered the room with Nalini, the sub-inspector stood and said, ‘Sir, I have taken her statement, and now I am reading it to her for her signature.’

‘What did she say about her partner Shantanu?’

‘She is saying that she didn’t know him.’

She is lying.’ Nalini said, ‘Maya, why are you lying? You two were living together in the hotel. You both went to Nepean Hillside Road and lived in the basement of the shop. You both killed Mohit, who was also your partner. You were in the seaside hotel. You fired on me when your partner, Shantanu, was fighting with someone. We had so many proofs against you. What did you think, that we are fools?’

She was silent and closed her eyes. Nalini said, ‘Okay, you didn’t know Shantanu; then why did you kill Mohit?’

After some hesitation, she said, ‘He wanted more money and threatened to go to the police.’

‘Why did he want more money?’

‘He wanted to go to Delhi to meet his lover and wanted to present her with a gold necklace and some earrings.’

‘Then, you should have given it to him?’

‘We explained to him about the delivery of the material, and we will get the full amount. And then we will distribute. Though we offered him fifty thousand at that time. But he was adamant and wanted one lakh. When we were unable to give him that much money for some time, he threatened us that he was going to the police. Then we acted and pushed him into the seawater. Shantanu pulled him into the deep water, and I held his legs. His head was submerged in the water. We only wanted to teach him a lesson, but he died after some time. Shantanu threw his body into the deep water. A current came, and while going back, it took the body into the deep sea and vanished.’

‘What relation do you have with Shantanu?’ Nalini asked her.

‘He is my husband.’ She said in a low voice.

‘Where is he?’

But she didn’t speak.

‘Okay. Nalini asked, ‘Who were those two men to whom you handed the packet?’

‘They were the clients. We supply them in bulk. They further supply in the different parts of Mumbai, Poona and the other parts of Maharashtra.’

‘From where were you getting the drugs? Who was supplying you?’

She remained silent for some time and then said, ‘Some of it we were getting from the farmer who grows Bhang on their fields. Some people were importing it from other countries and selling it to us. Then we were bringing it here and storing it in the basement of that shop.’

‘You know that Khandelwal had gone to Khandwa. Did your husband also go with him?’

She remained silent.

The inspector said, 'He might have returned now. We should raid his house and arrest him.'

'No, Nalini said, 'First, we should check her house. Had she given her house number and address?'

'Yes, ma'am. It is at the back of the Devi Temple, chaal number 106 and room number 8.'

Nalini said, 'We should go there. Check and raid. But before that, put two or three lady constables. She may try to run away from here. Ask her for the key to the room.'

The sub-inspector went and asked her. She said that the key is in the purse. He took it out and came out. Then they all moved outside. They sat in the jeep and reached at the back side of the Devi Temple. When they went to Chal number 106, the inspector said, 'We should be cautious. Ma'am, the sub-inspector will open the door, and I will cover him. These four constables will cover me. You remain at the back. If there is a fire, you should be safe.'

Nalini agreed. Sub-inspector ascended the stairs to the first floor and reached at room number 8. It was locked. He showed the room to all. The inspector indicated that the lock. He opened it and pushed the shutter open. The sound of the fire was heard. The shutter was not fully opened, and the bullet struck the shutter. Sub-inspector shouted, 'Surrender, Shantanu, otherwise we will start firing. Surrender now.' Again, two sounds of firing were heard. The inspector who was hiding at the side of the wall, peeping from the side of the open shutter, fired. Other constables also put their positions on the side of the wall. Nalini went to the side of the sub-inspector and shouted, 'Your wife Maya is serious in the hospital. Yesterday, someone shot her when she went to deliver the Ganja. The man who took the Ganja from her shot her. So, please surrender.'

Nothing was heard from the inside.

Nalini again shouted, 'I know you went to Khandwa with Khadelwal. You thought that Maya was safe here and instructed her to deliver the last consignment. We know everything, how you killed your partner, Mohit and for what reason. Your wife spoke about everything. So please surrender.'

Again, the shot of fire was heard. But the bullet passed through the open space of the door and struck the balcony post.

Suddenly, the Sub-inspector opened the door, dashed inside and started firing. A cry was heard, and somebody fell on the floor. Sub-inspector saw in the light coming from the open window at the backside of the room that Shantanu was lying on the floor. His pistol was still in his hand. The sub-inspector reached to him and kept his foot on his hand, took the pistol, and shouted, 'Sir, come inside.'

The inspector and the constables entered the room. The inspector found the switch and put it on. A bulb on the side wall brightened. Shantanu was lying on the floor. The bullet hit his thigh, and blood started oozing.

The sub-inspector held him and got him to sit on the bed. He was holding his thigh where blood was oozing. A constable took a veil and tied it at his thigh.

Nalini also came inside and asked with surprise, 'How had you entered the room when it is locked from the outside?'

He said, 'When I came back, I went to meet Maya at the seaside. I didn't find her. I tried to call her, but her phone was switched off. Then I thought that she might be hiding somewhere as she went to deliver the Ganja. I had a doubt also that she might be caught, and she might speak about me also. Then the police may come here. I thought to enter the room from the backside, Chal. There is hardly any distance between the two Chals. I went to that house and

requested the lady to allow me to enter my room from their window, as I didn't have the key. She permitted me, and I came here.'

'Very strange. How did that lady permit you to enter her house?' Nalini asked with surprise.

'She knows Maya and me. Sometimes Maya and that lady chat from the window.'

The inspector started searching the room. He found three backpacks. One of them was full of currency notes, which were genuine. Then he opened the built-in almirah. Some ladies' and male dresses were neatly folded and kept. Rest, nothing was found. The inspector asked him, 'You had so much money. Where would you take this?'

'I was planning to go to Delhi. I pay those from whom we got Ganja and other drugs.'

Nalini said, 'Further questioning can be asked later on. First, you take him to the hospital for treatment.'

'Yes, we will do that.' The inspector said and told the sub-inspector to take him and all the money. The amount was more than one lakh. He also took his and her dresses from the cupboard. While closing the window, Nalini looked outside. The gap between the two blocks was just two feet. There was a small drain in between the blocks, which was very shabby and smelled bad.

When they came out, the other tenants gathered and looked in surprise to him.

There was not much space in the jeep after keeping the bags. Shantanu was sitting between the two constables, and others were sitting on the side seats. Then Nalini came to the inspector and said, 'Take him to the same hospital where Maya is being treated. I have some work here. I want to do that and will come by taxi. Please ask

him after the treatment about the reason for the murder of Mohit. And also ask about Khandelwal.'

'But it will be better if you also come.' The inspector requested, 'SP and ASP also want to meet you.'

'I will come, if I get time. Otherwise, I will come tomorrow morning.'

'Okay, take care.' He said, and the jeep moved. When the inspector was gone, she turned to the backside of the Chal and reached for Chal number 105. She ascended the stairs and reached at the first floor. Then she moved and reached the room from where Shantanu entered his room. The door was closed. She tapped on the shutter. An old lady opened the door. She wished her and said, 'Aunty, may I ask you a question?'

She looked suspiciously at her and nodded. Nalini asked, 'Did that man living at the backside of your house come to you and enter his room from your window?'

'He is lying. No one came to my house. I never open that window. The gap between the two Chals is very shabby. People threw nasty things from their windows, and it stinks badly. So, I never open the window.'

Now Nalini was surprised. She looked for some time at her face. She felt that she was speaking the truth. Even though she asked, 'Are you living here alone?'

'No, my son also lives here. He was alone, working at a factory. I came here one week ago.'

Nalini asked, 'Your son lives with his wife?'

'He is not yet married. But why are you asking such types of questions?'

‘The police had arrested a man from that Chal. He said that he entered his room from the back window as he didn’t have the key and his wife was not at home.’

‘What can I say? But no one came to my house.’

Nalini thanked her and moved to the stairs.



(17)

In the evening, Nalini took Uncle and Aunty to show them the other side of the sea where Mohit was murdered. She took them from that side where the labourers kept their luggage. But labour and their children were not seen there. She took them near the seawater and got them to stand on shore on the wet sand. Suddenly, a heavy current ascended. The feet of both were submerged in the water. But when the current descended, the sand, where both were standing, also moved from under their feet. Aunty was about to fall when she held her and said, ‘Aunty, you hold my hand. Otherwise, you would fall.’

But aunty laughed and said, ‘Today, for the first time in my life, I experienced the wave of the seawater. I was standing easily. Now I will be cautious. Don’t hold my hand. Let me experience.’

Uncle said, ‘You are old and weak. You might fall.’

‘Had you experienced it previously?’

‘No.’

‘Then enjoy it. Nalini made us happy. God bless her. Adi hadn’t got time. Whenever he took us, he showed us the markets, temples and showed us the sea from his car. But Nalini gave us practical experience. Thanks, Nalini.’

They enjoyed themselves for hours. When it was dark, they returned to their home.



(18)

At night, at about nine, the inspector rang Nalini. She immediately came to the drawing room and took the call. The inspector said, 'Ma'am, SP and ASP had come to the hospital, and they interrogated Shantanu and Maya regarding the killing of Mohit. His story matches Maya's. Mohit asked for one lakh rupees. They told him to take fifty thousand, and the balance they would give him when they reached Delhi. But he was adamant and wanted one lakh. When they refused, he threatened them and started shouting and abusing. He threw his backpack on the beach and threatened to go to the police. When he started to go, they again requested to take fifty thousand. But he turned and moved. Then, fearing that he might go to the police, I threw him into the sea. He fell. I held his head and put it under the water. He started moving his legs. Maya held her legs. After some time, I took him out, but he was dead. We panicked and then threw his body into the deep water. The descending wave of water took him into the deep sea. Then, fearing that the police might trace us. We hired a taxi and went to the shop. They were also afraid that the police might trace them there, as they were supplying Ganja to the locals. So, we were leaving early in the morning and returning when it would be dark.'

When he stopped, she asked, 'What relation did he have with Khandelwal?'

'Khandelwal would take Ganja in bulk. Some he used locally, and the balance he supplied in bulk to the paddlers at different places at

Khandwa. On that day, when we raided, Shantanu was also there in the shop. Maya had gone to a local paddler for a delivery. When Somu mentioned the police, all the staff panicked. Khandelwal ordered to open the back door, and they went from that side. He requested the customer to go out from that side to avoid questioning by the police, and they might be arrested. Then Khandelwal told that he is going to Khandwa for an alibi. I also accompanied him. On the way, I rang Maya and told her to go underground. I also told her to hire a room in the Chal near the Devi Temple. She agreed and did as I told her.'

'He returned yesterday with Khandelwal, who dropped him near Marine Drive. He went home. They were having three more packets of the Ganja. The man to whom it was to be given rang him and told him that they would reach by five in the evening. He told them that Maya would meet them with the Ganja, and they should pay her at the Marine Drive. They agreed. So, Maya went to deliver wearing the veil. While going, she closed the door and locked it.

Nalini said, 'It means your case is solved. I also checked with the lady living behind his house. She told me that no one came to her house, and she keeps her window closed as the drain in between the Chals stinks very badly. Now everything is clear. Now you can go and arrest Khandelwal and ask him who he supplied the Ganja.'

'But you had to meet SP and ASP tomorrow. They want to meet you.'

'Yes, now I will meet them. I would come to your office at ten. What was the reaction of Maya when she saw Shantanu?'

'They started weeping. I think they were feeling for their wrong work.'

Nalini said, 'Anyway, now it is up to you. Take remand of both and take them to the places where they had delivered or supplied the

Ganja. I feel that it would be difficult to go to the depths of the case. But at least you could find something.'

'Okay, Ma'am, I will do that. So, you are reaching tomorrow morning. Should I send the jeep?'

'No, I will come by taxi.' Then she disconnected.



(19)

The next day, she reached the police station at ten in the morning. The inspector Gokhale received her, stood from his seat and said, 'I was waiting for you, Ma'am. Now we would go to the police headquarters. The ACP also wanted to meet you.'

'Why so, what am I doing there?'

'SP and ASP told him about you. They have called me to bring you to his office. So, we would go and meet him.'

Nalini smiled and sat in the jeep on the front seat. The inspector drove the jeep. The sub-inspector sat at the back.

They reached the police headquarters. When they reached the ACP's room, SP and ASP were sitting there in front of the ACP. The inspector introduced her and said, 'Sir, she is Nalini. She told us that Mohit was murdered by his friends or someone who was his close friend.'

ACP politely said, 'Come, madam, please have a seat. Inspector, please, you also sit.'

Nalini wished them and sat on a chair near SP. Then ACP said, 'You had helped us to arrest the murderer. I am very thankful to you.'

Nalini politely said, 'I had done nothing, sir. I only guided him, and he had done the field work.'

'This is your greatness. We were thinking that this was a suicide case.' ACP said and asked, 'But how did you think that he was murdered?'

'Simple, sir. I checked his eyes, and I saw an image of surprise in his retina. Then I thought that he was murdered either by his friend or someone close to him. The postmortem report also confirmed that his lungs and stomach were filled with seawater mixed with burnt coal particles. Then I checked the places where wood was burnt. I found the place where labourers were cooking their food and throwing coal and coal dust into the sea from the seashore at two places on the beach. That's all, sirs.'

'But the case turned out to be a narcotic, Ganja supply at Mumbai. How did you think that?' SP asked, looking at her face.

She said, 'I thought that they might be living somewhere nearby. So, I checked the hotels, and they were cheap. When I checked the Seaside hotel, the manager told me that two men and a lady had booked two rooms three days back, with four backpacks. Then, I called the Inspector and came out of the hotel's hall. At that time, Shantanu was fighting with some men. Suddenly, he fired at me. The bullet hit my shoulder, and I fell to the ground. Then Maya, who was looking from the first-floor window, fired at me. But it passed over my head. I was crying, and people started gathering near me.'

In the meantime, Shantanu and Maya ran away from the hotel; they might have taken three backpacks and left one.

When the inspector came and opened both the rooms, we found the bag full of Ganja and counterfeit notes

ACP praisingly said, 'You are a brave girl. May I know where you came from?'

‘I came from Delhi to meet my friends. I lived with them and planned to go back now.’

ACP said, ‘We were planning to close the case. But when all this happened, we asked the inspector to go ahead. You were not afraid of your life, why?’

‘Sir, I am the assistant of Mr Tula Ram, and he taught me never to be afraid of the culprits. They could shoot you. But if you are on the right path, God will help you. That’s why I was not afraid.’

With some confusion, ACP said, ‘I had read about one Tula Ram. Who calls himself Mr Tula Ram, BA, Jasoos Shiromani. Are you his assistant, Nalini?’

Nalini shied and nodded with a smile

‘Wa -O, I read about him who recovered the stolen arms. Likes to drink two cups of tea with two pieces of bread with butter and jam. Are you talking about him?’

‘Yes, sir, he is my boss.’

‘Congratulations, Madam. Here, you also solved the case. I am very happy.’

Nalini said, ‘The Case is not yet solved, sir. The owner of the shop on Nepean Hill side road had not yet been arrested. Maya and Shantanu should be taken to the places where they had supplied the drugs. Then, only the case could be closed. And, that you could do, sir. Now I plan to go back.’

The tea had been served. SP and ASP were looking at her with surprise. They were thinking how she dared to do all this. She was not more than 21-22 years old. But very daring.

After the tea, she said, ‘Now I will go, sir. My friend and her in-laws might be waiting for me.’

‘How had you come?’

‘I came by taxi, sir.’

ACP said, ‘Now you take my vehicle. The driver will drop you.’

Nalini pleaded, ‘Sir, it would be better if I went by taxi. Otherwise, my friend would think that I was arrested and released on bail. So, it will be better to go by taxi.’

She stood from her chair. ACP also stood with SP and ASP. The inspector immediately went outside and stopped the passing taxi on the road.

ACP, along with SP and ASP, came up to the taxi. Nalini folded her hands and sat in the taxi. All waved their hands to her. The tax moved.



THE END

