

JEWEL-LESS CROWN

SAGA OF LIFE

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BS Murthy

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F-9, Nandini Mansion,
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Dedicated to

VV Rao my soul mate, PN Murty the friendly cousin 'n KB Bhaskar,
my computer guru, for their support of my literary cause.

Book One : Artha 'n Kama

Chapter 1

Party Gone Sour

That New Year's Eve, all the *nouveau riche* of New Delhi seemed to have gathered at the Misty Nest in their ubiquitous wear. While women wore designer dresses, men turned up in safari suits. Hosting them at their grand dwelling in the Defense Colony were the Gautams, Prabhu and Sneha. By the time the last guest was hugged in welcome, Gautam's silk *kurta* and Sneha's mink coat were truly crumpled. Augmenting the warmth of their *bonhomie* was the Glenfiddich with soda. In time, while the lure of the Scotch drove many into the lap of Bacchus, the allure of Venus enticed others to ogle at the desirable. But, above all, it was Gautam's good-humored banter and Sneha's sensuous charm that lent aura to that midnight rendezvous.

When the New Year was an hour away in its coming, what with the inebriated becoming tardy in their tangos, the going got really bawdy. As Sneha too got into the act, there was a virtual riot for a round with her. When someone went overboard to bottom pinch her, she paid back with a belly punch that regaled the gathering.

As the gigantic clock was all set to halve the night, the antique chandeliers were put off. When the radium hands went straight up on the dial, the ribaldry reached a new low on the floor. At that, as the Gautams goaded all to raise their hands to fold out the year on hand, the boozers struggled to get on to their feet to welcome the year in the offing. But, for its part, the antique piece welcomed the incoming year with the first of its twelve chimes that reverberated in that sprawling banquet hall.

In the prevailing darkness, the euphoria that followed led to a fresh round of bear-hugs amongst the sexes before the stewards switched on the chandeliers as though to let those bear witness to the goings on. As if that translucence showed the revelers the reality of life, sanity was restored in that exuberant setting, and soon the pangs of hunger made the gathering scamper for the buffet of varied cuisines, brought from the capital's five-star restaurants.

When the hosts went up to the table to pick up their plates, a steward alerted Gautam to an urgent telephone call. Soon, seeing her man turn all pale, Sneha made her way to him in apprehension. When Gautam made her privy to their unfolding tragedy in an undertone, Sneha nearly swooned into his arms. The news of Suresh Prabhu, the heir to their business empire, hauled up in the lock-up was enough to unnerve her. That he was booked for rape and murder as well ravaged her soul no end. In her state of shock, she was unable to comprehend what Gautam mumbled into her ear to lift up her spirits.

Having realized that they were attracting undue attention, Gautam led his wife into the anteroom, leaving the gathering with a free rein on the rumor mill. The breaking news, set in motion by someone who had eavesdropped on the hosts' conversation, gained circulation with

understandable exaggeration. And there followed an intense debate about the eventual outcome of the current indictment that led to the Gautams' predicament. The indignant gathering, in one tone, roundly censured the hosts for the fall of their only offspring. For once, everyone seemed to agree that loose morals would only bring ruin in the end, even for the rich and famous. Of course, even the mighty of the world are bound to fail on the false path, so emerged the consensus. Even those who professed closeness to the Gautams maintained that they knew all along that things would come to this pass with Suresh, sooner than later.

Such are the ways of the world that the lows of life would turn the admirers into critics, and what is worse; make the naive speak as the know-all.

Closeting with Sneha, Gautam assured her that he would pull out all the stops to free Suresh in no time. But Sneha was terrified that the magnitude of the indictment might be beyond the endurance of their son. In spite of her awareness of their political clout and the loopholes of law, her sixth sense gave a dissenting note, making her apprehensive about the possibility of her son coming clean out of this messy case. But as hope coupled with her confidence in her go-getter man calmed her nerves a little, Gautam led her back into the banquet hall.

When the besieged couple resurfaced, what with everyone feigning camaraderie and volunteering help, hypocrisy seemed to rule the roost on the human stage. As if to show up the fallacy of human sympathy, appeared malice to induce innuendoes about the perceived closeness of Sneha with the powers that be.

'Why, in this topsy-turvy,' said a naughty one, 'her leeway is bound to come in handy, won't it?'

Not to be left out, curiosity too entered the arena to tie the crowd to the unfolding drama. When the hosts tried to make light of the incident as but a storm in the teacup, the guests maintained that they would not desert the ship in the storm. With his appeals for a premature adieu falling on deaf ears, Gautam left for South Extension with an entrapped feeling. Thereafter, preyed upon by her guests, Sneha remained a prisoner in her own palace.

When Gautam in a dilemma reached the South Extension police station, as Pramod Rawal, the Station House Officer (SHO), received him reverentially, he was a little relieved. But as the SHO made him privy to the incriminating evidence gathered against his son, Gautam was in a spot all again.

That very night at ten, one Saurav Swaroop came to the police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint. A worried Swaroop told an impatient Rawal that his daughter Shanti hadn't returned home yet though it was her wont not to stay out after seven. Worried over her life and limb, said Swaroop, he had contacted all those he should including his family friend Sohan Singh, the Circle Inspector (CI). At that, Rawal became alert and almost got into a saluting posture. The CI, Swaroop claimed, had advised him to take the matter to Rawal, the SHO on duty.

But, knowing the proclivities of his flock only too well, Singh left nothing to chance, and thus mobilized a force to search for Shanti. It was past ten, when a patrol party intercepted a speeding Mercedes at Mehrauli. As the teen at the wheel betrayed his unease, the Police saw the need for a thorough search of the limousine. And when they found the body of a woman in the back seat they were truly aghast. But, as the distraught lad revealed his identity, the cops were really dumbfounded. Having led the accused to the police station, they revealed the identity of the arrested to Rawal. Without any coercion, Suresh revealed that he had kidnapped the girl with the idea of raping her. While pleading that he had no intention to harm her, he confessed to having killed her under extreme provocation.

As feared by Rawal, the victim turned out to be Shanti Swaroop. And this unwelcome development irked him for he feared that the vengeful Singh might brutalize the brat, leaving him to fend for himself with a lock-up death. And the rest at the police station felt that in spite of his impeccable pedigree, Suresh was in for an unimaginable trouble.

An uncanny manipulator of the system that he was, Rawal thought it fit to inform Gautam before all else. After all, wouldn't Gautam involve the top brass to deter the CI from laying his hand on the lad? Besides, there is much to gain by helping the rich, isn't it? It was, thus, that Gautam's arrival lightened the cop's burden while raising his hopes as well. But his countenance

to Gautam's suggestive glances seemed to convey that the accused might not be able to get away for once. Given his closeness to the Swaroops, after all, the CI can be expected to be averse to hushing up the murder case. Besides, to splash the scandal in the making, the press-wallahs had already rushed back to 'Stop Press'.

"Saab, I've done my best in this ticklish case," said Pramod Rawal. "And the rest is in the CI's hands."

"Thank you Rawalji," said Gautam enticingly, "but don't I know how the system works. Why, you are the king-pin here, aren't you? I know you realize that I will put my wealth on line for my son's release."

"Saab, as I told you, Singhsaab has taken a personal interest in this case," said Rawal feeling sad that he couldn't avail of the chance of his lifetime. "If only it were in my hands, I would've surely given it a different twist."

"But still... "

"Saab, you better pull the strings at the top to see that your boy is not troubled by any," said Rawal trying to ingratiate himself to Gautam. "Well, I'll call up the CI saab only after you fix up things. And you too can speak to him a little later. After all, courtesy wouldn't spoil, will it? Be assured, I'll not let a fly come near your boy. Why, I'll treat him as my own son."

"Thank you, Rawalji," said Gautam as he dialed the Police Commissioner's residential number. "You may know I'm not the one to slight those who help me."

When Rawal in relief led him to Suresh, finding his son shell-shocked in the lock-up, Gautam himself was shaken to the core. When the son broke down seeing his father, the father could not hold back his tears either. But realizing that his nerves would unnerve Suresh even more, Gautam decided to put on a brave face.

To the approving nods of Rawal, Gautam averred that it was no more than a case of juvenile delinquency, and thus the courts were bound to treat it likewise. After all, there was no need for Suresh to worry over much for the sentence was going to be light. And to address his son's troubled psyche as well, the father showed an understanding to his misdemeanor. And to assuage his son's apprehensions on account of Sneha's absence, Gautam said that she was hell-bent on accompanying him and that it was he who dissuaded her from coming. Anyway, it was difficult for any mother to go through all that and in his situation; it would be delicate for Suresh as well to face his mother. Gautam tried to inject a dosage of optimism into his depressed son with the assurance that all would end well as he would line up a battery of ace lawyers to free him from his predicament.

In spite of his own enthusiasm, as Suresh remained gloomy, Gautam feared that his son might sink into depression. And to avert its happening, he thought that he should spring into action without any loss of time. But on second thoughts, he felt it prudent to wait for Sohan Singh's arrival. In time, when the fuming Singh made his appearance, Gautam needed all his suave to plead mercy for his son. However, it was Suresh's countenance that softened Singh's ire and that made Gautam heave a sigh of relief. Thus, leaving Suresh to Rawal's care, Gautam rushed to draft in Vijay Mehrotra, the eminent criminal lawyer.

In that nocturnal briefing, Mehrotra heard Gautam with all the sympathy due to a valued client's predicament. But in the end, he duly showed Gautam the tight spot into which his brat had put himself in. When the desperate father said money shouldn't be a constraint, the wily advocate assured that he would apply his mind to judicially undo his son's wrongdoing, of course, at the first hearing itself. Carried away by his own conviction, Mehrotra even dismissed the whole thing as no big deal at all. Nevertheless, he said that the Gautams would have some bad press to contend with to start with. But then, public memory being proverbially short, he averred, they would be able to put all this behind in no time. In the meantime, said Mehrotra, all that the Gautams needed to do was to remain calm, and loosen their purse strings to buy justice for their son.

And to make a skeptical Gautam feel at ease, Mehrotra sketched the contours of the countervailing defense against the weight of the incontrovertible evidence. At the end of the

briefing, impressed with Mehrotra's methods, Gautam was sure that an unconditional acquittal for Suresh was on hand. Assured of the likely twist of justice in the trial court, Gautam in relief headed home in his Rolls Royce. But soon, his apprehension about the imminent fallout of it all on his life and his wife's times dampened him no end.

'How thin is the line between glory and infamy!' thought Gautam sinking in the back seat. 'Doesn't it seem thinner than the second's hand that splits the time frame at every turn? The shine of the year gone by and the shame of the one on hand, oh, what a contrast they make! How all those guests so welcome at the dusk seem unwelcome even before it is dawn! But, how the course of the discourse at the Misty Nest might have turned after all that! Oh, the ugly turn of events, are they any less embarrassing for the guests? Maybe some of them could be gleeful as well, won't they? Indeed, how life could turn on its head overnight! Would Sneha ever be able to cope up with all this? And don't we need to camouflage the scandal before it ceases to interest? Well, one needs to be thick-skinned to brave it all. Thank God, I'm up to it anyway. It's as if life had prepared me to face this day!'

When Gautam reached Misty Nest, he found it inundated by the neighbors as well. As everyone rushed up to him in the portico itself, he tried to make it up by alleging that his rivals had falsely implicated an innocent Suresh. It was easy to see, he said with his trademark composure, all this was to scandalize his family and ruin his reputation in the same vein. It was like hitting two birds with the same stone. But he assured them nonchalantly that he would come up trumps after all, the indomitable fighter that he was. Apologizing for having spoiled the party, he got rid of them all one by one by bidding goodbye.

Though the Gautams felt relieved for having seen the back of their guests, yet they were overwhelmed by the tragedy that befell on them, and that denied them even a wink all night. If anything, the dawn made it worse for them as the glare of the scandal splashed in the newspapers irrevocably blurred their vision for days to come.

As the reportage of the crime, dubbed as Mehrauli Murder Case, tended to bring the background of the accused into focus, it irked the Gautams no end. What with the condemnation coming thick and fast from all quarters, it soon turned into a nightmare for them. One newspaper went overboard, suggesting that the Gautams too may be tried as the abettors of the crime for a lack of their brat's bringing up. Then and only then, averred the eloquent editorial, that the country's courts would be perceived as concerned with social justice.

But what kept the news alive for weeks on end was its potential to embarrass the ruling party for its patronage of the Gautams. Thus, in time, it all turned out to be a trial by the media, well before the case was committed to the session's court. As the crime caught the public imagination as well, the investigative journalists worked overtime to pull out skeletons from the Misty Nest's closets. The competitive yellow journalism that followed, tarnished the fair name of the Gautams, and shamed them in the process. Such was the media one-upmanship that even a magazine dubbed the decade-old general insurance claim of the Gautams as fraudulent while a tabloid insinuated that Sneha had all along promoted Gautam's business interests by entrusting her charms to the care of men who mattered.

It was only time before the women's groups joined the fray demanding justice to the victim's soul with a rope to the culprit's throat. The religionists, for their part, lamented over the depravity of the youth and attributed the same to the lack of faith in God. Of course, the conformists raised the decibels of the debate by deriding the baneful influence of the alien lifestyle on the age-old culture. The social scientists, as though not to lag behind, attributed the rise and fall of the Gautams to the deteriorating value system in the society of the day. The political pundits, however, attributed the rise of Gautam Prabhu to the position of power and prestige to the perils of the License Permit Raj. That he was on the verge of being nominated by the party in power to the *Rajya Sabha*, they averred, underscored the inimical politico-business nexus that was in place. And what a peril that posed to the nascent Indian democracy was anybody's guess. But, waiting in the wings, the human rights activists made no noise till then. It seemed as if they were hoping that the accused would be sentenced to death to enable them to get on to the centre stage. Whatever, well before the scandal ceased to make news, the remarkable transformation of Gautam Prabhu, a former Engineer of the Public Works

Department, into the most influential lobbyist in New Delhi became a matter of common appreciation.

In the mid-fifties, it was said, Gautam, with a ravishing wife and a burning ambition to make it big in life came to New Delhi from Andhra Pradesh. Having mastered Hindi meticulously and cultivating people methodically, he soon came to specialize in wheeling and dealing. Sneha Gautam, who eventually made waves on the cocktail circuit, nevertheless, made her debut with her Sneha Travels. Dazzling her influential clientele, soon enough, she reached far and wide in the travel world. But that was not all. Combining her unquestionable charms and questionable morals, she laid the foundation for the edifice of her husband's global empire. It was like she was the spark that ignited Gautam's ambition to make it to the zenith of wealth.

Having begun life in a by lane of Karol Bagh, the Gautams soon set their eyes on the avenues of Defense Colony, only to dominate its landscape in the end. Their palatial bungalow, evocatively named Misty Nest, became the owner's pride and the neighbors' envy, indeed of Lutyen's Delhi. Sadly for the Gautams though, and deservedly so as many thought, the veil of respectability that shrouded their vulnerability lay tattered. And that unmistakably exposed their shameful visages to the public gaze.

Owing to the fear of compromising their own reputation in their company, their former friends started distancing themselves from the fallen couple. What with the prospect of their only son ending up on the gallows staring in their face, troubled and shamed, the Gautams went into a cocoon in their Misty Nest. Moreover, used as they were to the hustle and bustle of life, the informal boycott in place seemed to weigh down heavily upon their social spirit.

Thus, in time, as the make-believe world they had built around them came crashing down, the Gautams remained in seclusion in their duplex dwelling. But, it was from that very setting, until not so long ago, that the Gautams had mesmerized the socialites of the country's capital, and strolled like colossuses in its portals of power.

Chapter 2

Trauma at Tihar

When Suresh Prabhu was produced before the metropolitan magistrate, he appeared disjointed. That was the day after his arrest, and as he looked traumatized, Vijay Mehrotra sprang up with alacrity. Seizing the chance to corner the prosecution, he accused the police of having tortured Suresh to extort that incriminating admission. And in the end, he dubbed the confessional statement as but a dubious document. Whatever, as the indicted appeared incoherent, and since Rawal too showed no inclination for his continued detention, the magistrate sent Suresh on remand to Tihar.

Though Gautam pulled the strings to ensure his smooth stay at the gaol, Suresh found it hard to face his lot. However, sensing that the accused was insensibly sinking into depression, in time, the jail doctor sent an SOS for psychiatric care. In the specialist counseling of Dr. Prakash Gupta that followed, Suresh unfolded his schizothymic mindset that baffled even the expert. At length, the specialist was able to place the bits and pieces of Suresh's troubled mind in the jigsaw of his psychic frame thus:

From his early childhood, Suresh had craved for his mother's affection but had to settle for ayahs' attentions. Upwardly mobile by the time he turned three, Sneha had no time for the apple of her eye. After all, she was engaged with her business during the day and partying in the evenings. But the veritable toy world that Gautam erected at home for him, gave Suresh a false sense of belonging. Thus, having grown up materially fulfilled but emotionally deprived, he had a bewildered childhood.

Moreover, his insatiate longing for the maternal love insensibly snowballed into an Oedipus complex in his adolescent mind. It was in that psychic state, fond of his mother but deprived of her affection, he was beset with a love-hate feeling for her. Well, this emotional disturbance inexorably sought sexual turbulence for his adolescent company. Gradually, all that afflicted his psyche and that induced aberrations in his libido.

Besides, the emotional void of his upbringing made him vulnerable to the sensual distractions of adolescence. Devoid of the paternal discipline and deprived of the maternal affection, he lacked the psychic barrier needed to keep the coarseness of the Delhi's abrasive culture at bay. It was, thus, the metro's insensitive ethos insensibly impinged upon his impressionable mind. And that drove him into the company of the spoiled brats at the Don Bosco. The delinquent life he happened to lead thus turned him insensitive to the decencies of life. It was only time before his bitterness with his self reached the pitch and that made him defiant to the discipline at the school. And his wayward ways led to his rustication from the school that even Gautam's pull could not help rescind.

But the slight he felt at the rebuke of his teacher at his own misdemeanor outraged his ego. His hurt psyche that saw the teacher as the cause of his plight sought to get even with him. No less, the derision the incident invited incited him to avenge himself. The scheming for revenge that he indulged in exposed his troubled mind to criminal cunning. After mapping the teacher's movements, he chose the moment to contrive an accident with his motorcycle. The vicarious pleasure he derived in flooring his victim, and then seeing him writhe in pain, surpassed his sense of vengeance but surprised the vestiges of his sensitivities.

Though the teacher narrowly escaped death, the needle of suspicion that tilted towards him under the weight of motive gave him his first brush with the law, and the Gautams their first taste of a scandal. But thanks to the parental clout he narrowly escaped landing up in a Borstal School. But the aggrieved academia's unrelenting opposition to his reprieve closed the doors of the elitist schools on him.

While Gautam was aghast at the setback, Sneha felt distressed about his future. But, preoccupied as they were with their own lives, they failed to summon the required imagination to amend his character. The neighbors who felt outraged at his conduct though barred their kids from mixing with him. But soon, they all mellowed, seemingly disarmed by his handsome looks and affected manner. But it was Gautam's largesse to help some school of lesser eminence build a swanky structure on its campus that helped Suresh avoid the tag of a school dropout. Soon, as the Gautams were back in their make-believe world, there was none to mend the disheveled mind of their son. And that left the troubled boy to fend for himself.

Amidst the middle-class crowd at the unheralded school, he turned supercilious and became a bully in due course. But when he finished his schooling, his mediocre aggregate became a handicap for Gautam to get him inducted into any professional college of some standing. However, owing to Sneha's connections, Suresh managed to find himself on the rolls of the prestigious St. Stephen's. Yet he felt that his parents had gone to lengths to keep him in the college not to cut a sorry figure for themselves on his account. It hurt him even more that they, having ignored his interests all along, should turn desperate to buttress his worth only to shore up their sagging image. All that made him feel that the way to get even with his parents, especially his mother, for his hitherto neglect was to get spoiled even more.

All the same, the accentuation of his sexuality imparted a carnal color to the canvas of his curiosity. It didn't take long for the deep attraction he always felt for his mother to turn into a vague sexual love for her. With each passing day, his Oedipus psyche sought sexual gratification in her possession, which in time became his sole obsession. So he tried to come closer to her on the sly but as he found her ever preoccupied, his frustration inculcated a feeling of vengeance against her. Thereby, he turned roguish at every turn to hurt her in every conceivable way.

When he noticed his mother's uninhibited manner with men, what with the outrage his jealousy induced in him, he began resenting her even more. But, the desire he spotted in the male eyes for her seemed to enhance his own craving for her in weird ways. As he insensibly focused on her, he noticed her flirtations with all and sundry. And that made him envious of them and hurtful of her. Thus, driven by jealousy, and compelled by curiosity, he came to spying on his own mother.

The first time he had seen her leading a stranger into her private room that was next to his own, he feared the worst and wanted to probe further. Using his ingenuity, he stealthily embedded peeping and hearing devices at vantage points in her room. Making sure that he managed to camouflage them from her casual vision, he lay in wait to spy her escapades.

That afternoon, as she moved in with a young guy, he went up to his observatory in anticipation. Oh, what was in the offing for his voyeuristic delight was beyond his adolescent fantasies! Admiring the youth for his manliness, she enslaved him in her ardent embrace. Gripping him to gauge what was on offer, she was profuse in her praises. Reaching for his lips eagerly, she savored them passionately. As the guy became all eager, she turned a tease to rein him in. When he went on his knees in submission, she pressed him to her crotch as if in triumph. When he shoved in his head between her thighs, she dropped her *pallu* over him as if to secure his ardor. When he pulled out her sari at her naval, she unbuttoned her blouse seductively. As he untied her *lehanga*, she removed her brassieres to his delight. Even as he was ogling at her nudity, no less eager to espy his essence, she undressed him with urgency. But as he sought to possess her, she subdued him into cunnilingus. Maybe, embarrassed at her becoming a foul mouth and as if to cease being clamorous, she herself took to fellatio.

Though the mother's wantonness affronted the son, yet her amorousness thrilled his own romanticism. But, the man's surging passion on her urging frame offended the son's sense of possessiveness. And, when the mother let that man penetrate her, the son felt as if she was being pushed out of his own heart. What's worse, her sexual surge leading to her orgasm left the son with a feeling of betrayal by his own beloved. Whatever, as her sexuality excited him sensually, her coital satiation with another male left him sullen. Above all, her moral degradation compounded by her lustful expletives distressed his materialistic sensibilities.

While his sense of parentage was belittled by her immoral ways, his self-righteousness too was troubled by his own sense of guilt. And that left him indignant. All the same, he was puzzled by the fact that his mother could indulge herself with relish with another male, in spite of her apparent affection for his father. Unable as he was to come to terms with the reality of her life, he was left wondering about her motives behind that sexcapade. Whatever, he couldn't help but pity his father for having been cuckolded, and on that score he came to experience a simmering contempt for him. The mixed feelings his voyeurism induced in him had resulted in accentuating his love hate for his mother. While her lovemaking that he watched erased the borders of his own filial sensitivities, his Oedipus desire turned into an incestuous lust to possess his own mother. He found that, the innate shame her conduct infused in him was at odds with his own craving for her curvaceous frame. While the son in him felt ashamed, the man in him was torn between his lust and hurt. As a way of resolution for his conflicting emotions, he thought of humiliating her by surprising her in her indulgence.

As he came to spy on her, soon he saw her spiriting a hunk into the room on the sly. And that distressed him even more for the change of her mate symbolized the debauchery of her soul. He felt as if he had lost his esteem to her as a lover, and wished to leave the slut of a mother alone. But the allure of her frame and his urge to voyeur her fare pulled him to the post. When he had seen her mounting the man, his sense of deprivation goaded him to catch her red-handed. But his desire to see her reach the climax capped his own intent. At the end of her rendezvous, as he found himself drained as well, he resented his own impotence to affront her in her misdeed.

After a couple of aborted moves to shame her in the act and having got addicted to the voyeuristic joy he derived from her indulgences, he gave up the idea altogether. However, he ceased to see her as his mother and came to view her as a beddable woman. In his state of perversion, supplanting his self for her mate in the familiar setting his voyeurism provided, he was wont to daydream for long. Consumed by his own urge to possess her, he was outraged by her sexual transgressions. It was this impotent rage that led him to suffer in eternal shame. The effect of this underlying cynicism affected his subconscious to trouble his conscience.

As neither masturbations nor wet dreams could bring him release, he opted for paid sex for relief. In his union with the harlots, even as he fantasized his mother, he visualized her humiliation in their subjugation. But, whenever a whore turned out to be aggressive, reminiscent of his mother's self-assertion with her mates, he suppressed them no end. It was thus he came to see his exploits in the brothels as his means of revenge on his mother. But, soon, he realized the hollowness of his revenge brought about by his generous doles to the whores for their extra favors. That he had to pay for what his mother offered to her mates on a platter made him feel defeated even more. And that made him dejected no end.

With the passage of time, as his need to vindicate himself by his own machismo became compelling, he contrived to seduce a girl on the campus and coaxed her into sex with the promise of marriage. But, the falsity of his own duplicity denied him the pleasure of the conquest. Thus, feeling defeated in his bid to humiliate his mother, he came to hating women, painting them all with the brush of her dark character.

Experiencing physical attraction for the fair sex but nursing emotional apathy for them, he thought of rape to enjoy and hurt them at the same time. It was only time before he looked for his prey and realized that housewives would be a better bet. Once, he forced himself upon an unsuspecting woman and that readily catered to the conflicting emotional needs of his schizothymic psyche. While her pleadings to be spared of her humiliation gave him the feeling of an arbiter of her shame, the resistance he encountered in the face of his assault appealed to his sense of combat. But eventually, as he could subdue her, he felt elated by the strength of his own libido. All that made him feel as though he was doubly rewarded for his violation. Also, his perception that the woman coalesced after all, catered to his sense of virility. But, above all, having enjoyed the fare as long as it lasted, her picturing the sex as rape buttressed his cynicism about women. So he ended up where he began.

The feeling that the woman tried to wash her own guilt with a profusion of her crocodile tears seemed to wipe out his own sense of humiliation brought about by his mother's misconduct. Thus, while the subjugation of an unwilling woman satisfied his sense of revenge on his mother, the humiliation he could heap on the hapless dame addressed the hurt of his troubled mind. The warning he delivered in the end to the vanquished 'to keep shut or else' seemed to seal her shame while signaling his own triumph.

Having enjoyed the fruits of his first trespass, he set himself on the hazardous course of violating the fair sex. Nevertheless, owing to his victims' fear of scandal, he came out unscathed in umpteen violations. And, for the lack of repercussions, he came to see the lane of rape as but his thoroughfare of vindication. It was with impunity that he began to satiate his lust, raping the women he fancied. Insensibly thus he turned out to be a habitual rapist ever on the prowl.

That fateful evening, he happened to see Shanti who resembled Sneha in every manner. Taking her as Godsend, he felt excited at the prospect of what was in the offing. Raving about her thus, he lost no time in tricking her into his car. Driving her in the top gear to his father's Mehrauli House, he raped her with all his pent-up fury, as though she were his mother herself. In the end, as was his wont, while he sought to see his ultimate triumph in her humiliation, Shanti, besides calling him SOB, scorned him with all her contempt. As her remark pushed his dichotomic psyche to its edge, he tripped the line. As though to snuff out the very source of his humiliation, he strangled her with all the hate he had been nursing for his mother.

As she lay motionless, he was gripped by a sense of revulsion for having hurt the woman he enjoyed. Confounded by his own hurt, he made love to her body as though to bring her back to life. Yet, as the guilt of his ingratitude gave him no respite, he cursed his mother for the crime he had committed. And having looked at her body for long with self-remorse, so as not to shame her soul further, he wrapped it in her sari. Though he gathered his wits to shift the body into the car, yet he had no idea what to do with it. However, as he started driving slowly, survival instinct made him look out for an ideal locale to dump the corpse. Before he could act, he sighted the police on patrol from some distance and so tried to speed past them.

While the psychiatric care that followed at Tihar enabled Suresh position his past in its proper perspective, the reality of the present psyched his fears about his future.

'Would I be hanged?' he dreaded at the prospect often and prayed in turn. 'Oh God, why not be a lifer?'

Chapter 3 ***Mind of the Maligned***

While Suresh turned to God in the gaol, Mehrotra answered his prayers in his study. As Gautam gave him a blank cheque, Mehrotra began to lay the path for Suresh's acquittal. Having tutored Suresh about the nuances in retracting his statement in the court, the learned lawyer had outlined the line of the defense during the impending trial. The accused was made privy to the fact that with befitting bait, the Swaroops were caught in the defense web to become hostile witnesses in the court. That would help the defense to portray the trial as an attempt by the Gautams' detractors to malign them and victimize their son. A cricket buff that he was, Mehrotra added that the Swaroop *doosra* would baffle the public prosecutor. Oh, how the fellow was itching to score!

As it's the personal conviction that enables one to come up with a convincing performance in the court, Mehrotra mapped the contours of the escape route to Suresh thus: The Swaroops would testify under oath that the accused and the deceased were steady for long and were to be betrothed soon. That would enable the defense to shift the murder onto some unknown hands and unable to retain the crease of motive, the prosecution would get stumped in the process.

Gautam would stand witness to the 'fact' that the lovebirds went to his Mehrauli House to amuse themselves. They were to return to the Misty Nest in time for the surprise announcement of their engagement on the New Year's Eve. But, as luck would have it, instead of the Gautams announcing their son's engagement to the assemblage, it was Rawal who broke the incredible news to them.

The Swaroops would play ball by pleading that they were forced to complain to the police though they were aware that Shanti went out with Suresh. They would make out that some thugs descended upon their house at around nine that evening. That was, as they were preparing to leave for the Misty Nest for the momentous event. And it was that gang which forced Saurav to prefer that damned 'missing person' complaint at the South Extension police station. With his wife held as hostage, Saurav would aver that he had to fall in line, never mind his qualms. Thus, under the pain of death to his wife, he preferred that missing person complaint, designed by Gautam's detractors to implicate his innocent son. Being aware of his closeness to Sohan Singh, and to keep him off the track, the intruders had forced Saurav to mislead him as well.

Then, it would be left for Suresh to concoct a murder story thus: At around nine, as Shanti and he were getting into his Mercedes at the Mehrauli House they were accosted by five masked men. While three gagged him, the remaining began strangling Shanti. Even as he struggled to free himself to save her, they stuffed out her life before his hapless self. Before they made their escape, they warned him not to leave the farmhouse before ten. In case he ventured out before the deadline, they told him to prepare himself for an ambush.

Stunned out of his wits, Suresh was stay put as ordered. When it was past ten, he headed home with the body of his beloved. Shortly after he hit the road distraught, making it a double jeopardy for him, the patrol police intercepted him. How his misery multiplied and his tragedy compounded! Though he tried to explain to those who detained him, they were in no mood to listen to him. Simply, they hauled him up for rape and murder on conjecture. What is worse, to save themselves the bother of finding the real culprits, the police saw an easy way out to close the case by extracting the confession from his hapless self.

Mehrotra assured Suresh that such a line of defense would make it an open and shut case of his innocence. If anything, the onus of apprehending the 'real' culprits would shift on to the police. Besides, pressured by the women's groups, even if their plea for a payroll were to be rejected, nothing would be left to chance to bring about a speedy trial to get a ready acquittal. Thus, said Mehrotra, he laid a flat wicket for Suresh to bat on blindfolded.

Though hopeful of reprieve, yet Suresh despaired. Living hitherto under the shadows of the gallows, he could not see beyond the noose. However, having been shown the end of the dark tunnel, he began to worry about his dismal future.

Such is the irony of life that man tends to visualize dark clouds even while seeing the silver lining.

'What if I won't be free again?' Suresh began to brood. 'Then, won't I rot in Tihar forever? Why, for all my wayward ways, won't that make it just deserts for me? Were it an acquittal even, Mehrotra's methods notwithstanding, who knows, the trial might drag on for ages. Well, that would only confine me to this hole ruminating over his pep talk. And, what about my life after release, that is, as and when that happens? Haven't the shadows of my past darkened the prospects of my future? How could I ever survive the stigma of calumny? Why did I allow myself to come to this pass? What a mess I have made of my life!'

As he recalled the nightmarish experience, he began to visualize the agony of Shanti. He was shocked to realize that all along he had perceived her as the cause of his downfall.

'Is it not proof enough for my depravity, if ever one were needed?' he thought remorsefully. 'Surely, she would have had her own dreams about life and could have nursed her ambitions with hope. What villainy that I had put an end to her aspirations by stuffing out her life itself! How unfair was life for her!'

As the import of the tragedy from her angle began to sink in his imagination, he lamented even more at the unfortunate end to her life. 'Why had she to pay for my troubled psyche?' he thought in the hell of his cell. 'Was it her fault that she happened to be a look-alike of a sick man's mother? For all I know, her nature could juxtapose mom's character. How ironical life is, in that it makes one pay for the mistakes of others! Why haven't judicial errors sent many an innocent to the gallows? Oh, how many might have ended up in the grave owing to murder by mistaken identity! Well, am I not paying for the sins of my mom?'

'But, how am I to know why she did what she did,' he thought as he began to experience a new empathy for his mother. 'What was worse, she scandalized herself in the process. How naive of me to have condemned her as if I were an infallible judge! Haven't I punished her and myself as well, perhaps, her more than all? If not for me, her dirty linen would never have come for a quick wash in the public. And my poor father has to endure the ignominy and suffer in silence. What a loss of face for both of them! After all that eminence that is. How they would be braving it out!'

'What did I gain by raping all those!' he continued as his focus shifted on to those whom he had wronged. Transient release and enduring revenge, that's what I got, isn't it? But then, the release was sullied by fear, and the revenge remained flawed, after all. As for the sex itself, it was more of a mechanical motion than even a physical union, not to speak of emotional integration. Where was the feeling of sensual intimacy that I had seen those guys experience in mom's lovemaking? Well, my perverse psyche led me astray, only to cause my ruin in the end! And how many women have I traumatized, by the way? Wonder, how did I strangle the very woman whom I used for my sexual gratification? Not even animals are known to kill their mates, do they? Didn't I turn worse than a beast then?'

'Didn't it all begin with my incestuous desire for mom, only to end up with blood on my hands?' he continued his contemplation. 'Won't Shanti's death haunt my soul forever? Would the world ever let me forget my past! What about being normal in the company of women? Is it left in me to fall in love, much less voice it again? Who would wed me after all this? Even otherwise, would I be able to lead a normal married life? Given my troubled psyche, would that be possible even if my wife were to be an understanding woman? Would my burden of guilt let me ever erect for all that? Do I feel gripped of late? Oh no! Would Shanti's curse keep me useless all my life?'

'Why did I abuse my life and theirs as well?' he continued in remorse. 'Now that I see it all in a fresh light, won't the lingering thought of their trauma torment me forever? It seems insensitivity has its own advantages! But it is with the rungs of suffering that the ladder of reform is built, isn't it? How wrong of me that I saw mom from the angle of my own wants! How am I to know if my expectations of her attentions were unsound? How stupid I was to grudge her on that count, and feel avenged by violating others! But, how distressed was she seeing me in distress! How she cried her heart out as though to wash my sin off my soul itself! Surely she loves me more than I ever thought she would.'

As he thought about his mother in a maternal mode, he seemed to experience a change in his understanding of her. 'What's her fault, after all?' he thought melancholically. 'She might have had her own compulsions of life, couldn't she? How am I to know whether dad had measured up to her want or not? Or, who knows, she was probably indulging herself wantonly to satisfy his whim, or even to buttress his business, as the talk goes. Whatever it was, after all, they have a right to lead their life the way they wanted to, don't they? Was it the fault of the parents if their children measure them on the scale of uprightness? Why should the onus be on the parents to live up to the pious images of them conjured up by the children? How silly that children fashion yardsticks for their parents, especially for the mother, without knowing what it is to be a grown-up! How fair is it for one to expect one's mother to be asexual?'

'Oh God, if only I had the sense to understand then!' he thought in despair. 'Would I have developed all those negative feelings for the fair sex? No way, and surely I wouldn't have inflicted sexual hurt on all those, leave alone killing poor Shanti! How could I ever fault mom for her ways, when I violated women without qualms? If ever she comes to know that my psyche got bugged because of her, would she ever forgive herself? At least, I should spare her that last straw of guilt on her humiliated back. That much I owe to her.'

'Thank God, Dr. Gupta is not a loose talk,' he thought with a sense of relief. 'I have his word that he will keep it all to himself. Surely he wouldn't allow mom to get an inkling of my predicament. Oh, how the press pictures her as a slut as if the rest of her ilk is nunnish! Get caught, you're in the dock, if not, continue under the cloak. What irony scandal is?'

'Why not I turn a new leaf in my life, ironically on lease by Mehrotra's ruse?' he thought at length. 'What of the course correction then? Would I ever imagine hurting any in any manner whatsoever? But would that do to lead a useful life? Well, it's constructive care that might help erase the debilitating effects of my negative past. What about lending a helping hand to the abused of the world? Maybe, eventually that might put me on the path of redemption, won't it? God, give me the chance to live and have the conviction to make that my mission in life. Why let me dangle by the rope that I strangled Shanti in sickness? Why not put my life at stake to save another? Won't Thou grant me this one favor O Lord?'

Suresh's new found faith in the will of God made him take the maneuvers of Mehrotra with a pinch of salt.

'Won't his twisted means justify my upright ends?' he tried to probe the rights and wrongs of the expected verdict. 'Or would it be no more than a hoax? What of justice then? Whose justice is it anyway, but that of the statute? And won't that vary from state to state! Isn't it in itself a travesty of justice in our imperfect world? But then, who said that it is a just world? If not, why should nature condemn one species as food for another species? What justice is all that? Is it not absurd to suggest that man had evolved equitable laws while God failed to do so? No denying that, my violations on them would have traumatized many, but was it not my sick mind that was the cause of it all? What was worse, it was Shanti's ranting that provoked me to resort to the crime. Yet her abuse would have been *passé* for many. But given my psyche, that touched my raw nerve, didn't it? Whatever, how agonized I am that I had unfairly caused her death! It's as if the courts can't account for the penitence of the accused in meting out the punishment. Now that I'm repenting, am I not entitled for a reprieve?'

'After all, what should be an equitable punishment to a given crime?' he thought in the same vein. 'Well, it's the question that confronts societies. Didn't it appear logical for long that the offender is subjected to the same hurt he inflicted upon the victim? But, hasn't a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye become out of tune with the sensibilities of our times? A lost tooth or a blind eye would still keep life going for the victim and the violator alike. Wouldn't the gallows for the murderer deprive life for them both? How to deal with the crime and punishment within the boundaries of life and death is the moot point. Won't that depend on the proclivities of the one who comes to dispense justice? How lucky, if my case is heard by him who believes that life behind bars would meet the ends of justice. God forbid what if it's the conviction of the one in the chair that the cause of justice demands the throat of the culprit! Won't that make him or her murderer of sorts with the judicial tool of a rope?'

'What could be the rationale behind the capital punishment!' he thought in despair. 'What is it that is sought to be gained by depriving me of my life? Are they not making out that it's the rope to my throat that leads the victim's family to the realms of justice? If only my death could resurrect Shanti, would not I have willingly walked up to the gallows by now? And is it not a specious argument that Shanti's soul would not rest in peace if I am alive? Does it not amount to vilification of her character for it implies the retributive nature of her soul? Well, this public clamor for the capital punishment is nothing but the manifestation of man's own savagery. I killed her when I lost my cool but in all calmness these seek my death. How would the public ever grasp the nuances of a given violation to air an opinion?'

'What could be the fear of the society to leave me alive?' he thought in the end. 'If it seems women wouldn't remain safe with me around, then why not I be jailed for life? Won't that let women see the back of me while I may still look forward to whatever little life has to offer me? If my repentance makes a better soul of me, why should I be prevented from joining the mainstream all again? It's not that the planet is full of nice guys out to reach out to the people at large! That way, how it gets lost on the law that the society has nothing more to lose, and may even gain for my reformist zeal. Why, won't making me dangle by the rope mean denying me the chance to change? More to the point, the society would be deprived of a decent citizen that is after I would be through the jail drill. As I intend to help the outraged, won't that amount to saving a life to serve some others? And that would make my acquittal just in itself, wouldn't it? Thus, my urge to lead a useful life should make Mehrotra's dubious methods for my acquittal upright. Would it not make a case of ends justifying the means?'

'What if I am sent to the gallows after all that?' he couldn't help but think. 'But then, aren't there two sides to the same coin? In a way, is not death preferable to the life of a lifer with all its attendant deprivations? Seen that way, death row is any day a better option for it entails a short stay. What about the dread of climbing up the gallows? After all, it is the love to live that lets man fear the noose. When one is reconciled to death, then it should be much less a bodily pain than one might have endured in life, isn't it?'

Chapter 4

Twist at Tees Hazari

The concerned and the curious alike thronged to the gates of Tees Hazari to witness the trial of the Mehrauli Murder Case. As the doors were thrown open that morning, everyone jostled to reach the designated courtroom for a vantage position. The crowd was seemingly dying to see the accused and his mother.

Partly addressing their curiosity, Gautam walked in with a posse of lawyers led by Mehrotra. As they took much of the front row, the gathering, though felt let down by Sneha's absence, looked forward to Suresh's arrival with bated breath. Thus, calm reigned in the courtroom until the clock struck ten when Suresh was brought in. And agog with excitement, the crowd rose as one man. The commotion continued for long with people falling over each other for a better view of the handsome youth. Used as he was to the trials involving celebrities, the *daftari* felt he had never seen such a disorder in the courtroom before. But as he yelled out for order before ushering in Justice Ms. Sumitra Choudhary, it was pin drop silence.

As the father and the son couldn't take their eyes off each other, the crowd could discern the pathos of the former and the agony of the latter. In vain, Suresh's eyes sought for Sneha, and Gautam's gaze seemed to solicit an understanding on her behalf. Before Gautam could gesticulate to his son to relax, Justice Choudhary entered the arena to take her exalted seat. Even as the assembly rose to a man to fulfill the norm, Suresh bowed to her as though to his destiny. As the Justice took the chair, Pradeep Paranjape, the Public Prosecutor, got up to present the case of the prosecution.

Having received her nod, Paranjape was unequivocal in his eloquent condemnation of the accused.

"Ms. Justice, this is an open and shut case of kidnap, rape and murder, committed by the accused, Mr. Suresh Prabhu, the vagabond son of the formidable Mr. Gautam Prabhu. In this regard, I would like to draw the attention of this court to the F.I.R No. 420/1974 of the South Extension police station, New Delhi. The written complaint of Mr. Saurav Swaroop, the father of Ms. Shanti Swaroop, the murdered woman, is enclosed with the F.I.R.

Ms. Justice might peruse from the Exhibit No. I that at 10 PM on 31 December 1974, Mr. Saurav Swaroop went to the police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint regarding the disappearance of his nineteen-year-old daughter Ms. Shanti. In the said complaint received by Mr. Pramod Rawal, the Station House Officer, Mr. Swaroop had clearly stated that his daughter, Ms. Shanti, habitually returns home by seven in the evening. But on that fateful day, she failed to reach home even by nine. When he failed to trace her at any of the likely places, he feared for her life at the worst and harm to her limb at the least. Then, he went to the said police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint. A worried father that he was, Mr. Swaroop sought the intervention of the police to help trace his daughter. Considering the gravity of the law-and-order problem in our lawless metropolis, the police went on overdrive to find out Shanti's whereabouts.

Past ten that night, a patrol party at Mehrauli noticed a speeding Mercedes, and signaled the driver to stop. When the car came to a screeching halt, they found a dazed youth at the wheel sounding incoherent on questioning. When the police resorted to a routine check, in the back seat they saw a young woman in the sleeping posture. As the lad who identified himself as Suresh Prabhu, s/o. Mr. Gautam Prabhu, failed to explain what was wrong with his companion, the police naturally got suspicious. Upon his questioning, as the matter got curiouser and curiouser, the police tried to wake up the girl to ascertain the situation. It was then that they realized they had to contend with a murder case, and detained the indicted as the prime suspect.

When Pramod Rawal, the SHO of the SE-PS, reached the place, he found that the deceased resembled the girl in the photograph left behind by Mr. Swaroop. Thereafter, the police acted as per the laid down procedures when Mr. Suresh Prabhu was apprehended and the Mercedes with the body was moved to the SE-PS. Losing no time, the SHO sent for Mr. Swaroop for identifying the body. As feared, Mr. Swaroop readily identified the dead girl as his daughter, Ms. Shanti. In the meantime, the indicted too made a clean breast of himself confessing that it was he who had raped and murdered her. He also owned up his culpability in kidnapping her that very evening. The confessional statement of the accused and the related documents form Exhibit No. II.

Ms. Justice may please peruse Exhibit No. III containing the forensic reports that conclusively prove that the accused had assaulted and raped Ms. Shanti. That the semen of the indicted was the same as that which was swabbed from the victim's vagina would prove the incidence of penetration. That it was not a case of voluntary surrender on the part of the deceased to the accused is proved by the fact that the former was badly bruised. All this would establish beyond reasonable doubt that the victim resisted the indicted's molestation bid before she succumbed to him against her will.

And the accused's guilt in the murder of Ms. Shanti is borne out by Exhibit No. IV. The post-mortem report adduces that Ms. Shanti's death was caused by strangulation at around 09 PM on 31 December 1974, i.e. an hour or so before the indicted was apprehended carrying her corpse in his car. Hence, the forensic proof of his raping her and the circumstantial evidence of his murdering her that would incontrovertibly corroborate with the confessional statement made out in his own hand of his own volition.

Thus, Ms. Justice, the detainment of the indicted with the victim's body, the forensic reports confirming his violation of the victim, his confessional statement owing up his guilt in the kidnap, rape and murder of the deceased besides the corroborative evidences of his involvement in these crimes, together establish the culpability of the accused, Mr. Suresh Prabhu in the kidnap, rape and murder of Ms. Shanti Swaroop on 31 December 1974.

It is submitted that it is the case of the prosecution that the guilt of the indicted is proved without an iota of doubt, which is by far a better proposition than the dictum of beyond

reasonable doubt. Taking cognizance of these premeditated offences by a spoilt brat, the court may deem it fit to convict the indicted and award him an exemplary punishment. It is only thus the society could be ridden of the menace posed by this habitual offender who is a criminal by his very instincts. If ever set free, given his savage mindset, he's bound to be a scourge to the fair sex. Ms. Justice would agree that it in itself would be a miscarriage of justice, which the court would like to avoid. That's all Ms. Justice."

As tutored, Suresh had pleaded not guilty and accused the police of extracting the confession under the third degree. For better effect, he repeated the concocted story that Mehrotra had helped him memorize at Tihar. As Shanti's father too went with the indicted, and maintained that his complaint to the police was made under duress, the case of the prosecution seemed to collapse. As though to drive home the last nail in the prosecution coffin, Mehrotra got up triumphantly to sum up the inviolability of the defense's position.

"Ms. Justice, the averment of the victim's father before this honorable court that she was all set to be betrothed to the indicted should be noted. Does it not give lie to the prosecution's accusation of rape in the first place? Besides, it is preposterous for any to suggest that the indicted murdered his own beloved, that too hours before they were to be betrothed! It is submitted to this honorable court that there was no motive whatever for the indicted to murder the deceased.

Though the forensic report confirms the victim's death by strangulation, it is worth noting that it did not indicate any hand of the indicted in it. This aspect of the murder alone would lend credence to the averment of the indicted that it was the handiwork of some unknown miscreants. On the contrary, it exposes the shallowness of the prosecution that seeks to condemn an innocent youth caught in the vortex of business rivalries. When it comes to the bruises on the victim's body, decency demands one wouldn't probe them any further.

As we all know, Mr. Gautam Prabhu, the father of the indicted, is a leading light of New Delhi. It is a common knowledge that he was in line to get the coveted nomination to the *Rajya Sabha*. The sordid episode of Ms. Shanti Swaroop's murder was a product of a diabolical conspiracy of Mr. Gautam Prabhu's detractors out to hurt him politically and otherwise too. In the prevailing cynicism, how does it matter if hitting the opponent below the belt involves the murder of a young girl and foisting the crime on her lover? And the way the yellow journalism targeted the indicted's mother for no fault of hers save her God given charm! Won't that make one wonder whether it's a curse to be born a beautiful woman? Well, who suffers from qualms anymore these days in besmirching the fair name of a spirited woman, if only to make her man bite the political dust?"

Mehrotra paused to let the woman in the judge develop empathy for the indicted's tarnished mother.

"Ms. Justice would appreciate how all this might affect the psyche of the unfortunate son," said Mehrotra resuming his argument. "On top of it was the trial by the media, conducted by the plants of the conspirators in the fourth estate. Hadn't the indicted stood condemned already? And sadly, the reputation of an elite family was callously colored with infamy. It is a travesty of justice that Mr. Gautam Prabhu's adversaries achieved what they wanted. Why, his political career lay shattered and his personal image got tattered. Now it is left to this honorable court at least to salvage the indicted's honor by setting him free forthwith."

As though riding a tide and carried away by his own rhetoric, the redoubtable Mehrotra took on the law enforcing agencies in the same breath.

"The right thinking people ought to condemn the shady role the police played in this sordid episode," thundered Mehrotra. "Their lazy surmises are being thrust upon this honorable court as the results of a painstaking investigation. No civilized society should feel safe under such a bunch of the custodians of law who subserve their conscience to the dictates of the powers that be to implicate the innocent. Having failed to apprehend the culprits who murdered Ms. Shanti Swaroop or out to protect the authors of the heinous crime, the police have given the color of rape to consensual sex between two teenage lovers on the verge marriage.

And the police, to either save their skin or to serve their political masters and/or both, shamelessly made the indicted, the victim of the tragedy, as the villain of the piece in this in this case. Whither went the conscience when he who had the misfortune to witness the murder of his beloved was pictured as the perpetrator of the crime itself? Thus, Ms. Justice, I implore upon this honorable court to dismiss this fabricated case foisted upon the indicted with the contempt that it deserves. Ms. Justice may deem it fit to set Mr. Suresh Prabhu free with due honor so that he could lead as dignified a life as possible under the circumstances.”

Bowing to the judge, Mehrotra had a supercilious stare at the dumbfounded Paranjape. And then to the welcome gesture of a grateful Gautam and the muted congratulations of his own juniors, he strolled like a colossus to take his seat. When Gautam looked at Suresh with relief, the latter was confounded with mixed feelings. Though elated at the prospect of an acquittal, Suresh was uneasy that he and others had to lie under oath for his reprieve. At the same time, Paranjape's shoulders drooped, suggesting that he was out of depth to press for a conviction. As though the despair of the prosecution got spread in the courtroom, it was filled with murmurs of an inevitable acquittal. As the *press-wallahs* were excited about the twist that the case took for bettering their copy, there came a turn to the proceedings from an unexpected quarter.

In that state of willing suspension of disbelief, no one took note of a burka-clad woman from the back row going near the sulking Paranjape. When she handed over some paper to the public prosecutor, the gathering stood up as one man to see what was on hand. As Paranjape poured over her note, the crowd whispered in wonderment whether it had anything to do with the trial on hand. Noticing the nuances in his demeanor at every turn, the gathering got expectant and waited with bated breath.

When an elated Paranjape jumped up to the judge to confabulate with her, even Gautam felt nervous fearing the import of the intruder on the trial. As Paranjape confabulated with Her Ladyship, from his body language Mehrotra sensed that the stranger could spell trouble to the defense. And, Suresh too had a premonition that the woman could be one of his victims who had come to testify against him.

Justice Ms. Sumitra Choudhary adjourned the hearing to the post-lunch session that flummoxed the defense team and mystified the gathering. When Paranjape led the stranger to the court chamber, Suresh envisioned his being led to the gallows. And it was conjectured all around about the relevance of the intruder to the case on trial that she could be an eyewitness to the crime who waited in the wings till the very end. That the trend of the trial indicated an acquittal, she might have decided to stop the tide for the cause of justice, so felt some. Thus, the expected drama of the post-lunch session whetted the appetite of the public to the hilt. But, as things turned out, the gathering had to leave the courtroom without satiation.

Chapter 5

Trial in Camera

With Paranjape's plea for a trial in camera began the post-lunch proceedings in the Judge's chambers. He averred that the witness was entailed to have her identity as well as her deposition kept by the court away from the public. After all, he said, on her own, the witness had come forward to help the cause of justice and thus serve the public interest. Besides, he alerted the court about the delicate nature of her testimony and the likely embarrassment the cross-examination could cause her. Having considered Paranjape's pleas on merits and as Mehrotra had no precedents to quote against to poke his nose; Justice Sumitra began the hearing in her chambers. Though the trial commenced soon enough, that seemed an eternity to the accused.

When the stage was set for Paranjape to take the floor, he ordained the witness to remove her burka. While Mehrotra tried to size up the young woman who emerged from the veil, Paranjape tried to map the nuances of Suresh's demeanor.

“Don't you know who she is?” Paranjape asked Suresh.

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