

# Prey on The Prowl



 Self  
imprint

BS MURTHY

# Prey on the Prowl – A Crime Novel

BS Murthy

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

## **Chapter 1**

### ***Prey on the Prowl***

That June evening, the crimson sun gave in to the dark monsoon clouds to let them end its long summer reign over the Deccan skies. What with the thickening clouds thundering in triumph, Detective Dhruva woke up from his siesta, and by the time he moved into the portico of his palatial bungalow at 9, Castle Hills, the skies had opened up to shower its sprawling lawns. It was as if the eagerness of the rainfall matched the longing of the parched soil to receive its fertile mate in an aroma of embrace, and in the ensuing echoes of that seasonal union, the roots of the garden plants devoured every raindrop, that is, even as their leaves shed the overburden to accommodate the new arrivals.

In that setting, as Dhruva, impelled by all that, stood engrossed, Raju, the housekeeper, fetched him a plateful of hot *pakodas*, which, facing the spatter, he began to savor, and before he had finished with the snack, Raju returned with a mug of steaming Darjeeling tea for him. Soon, as the refreshed sun resurged to warm up the leaves, even as the satiated roots let the bounty go down the drain; done with the beverage, the detective picked up the sachet of *lanka pogaku* to roll a cigar, and then as he reached for the cigar lighter, the rainbow, in its resplendent colors, unfolded in the misty skies. However, when he began puffing away at the exotic cigar, as if dispelled by its strong scent, the dissipated clouds began disappearing from the horizon.

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

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

Soon though, Dicey began barking at the gate, again inducing Dhruva to reach to the window, through which he saw a sensuous woman, tentative at the half-open Iron Gate of his mansion. Enamored of her attractive face and desirous of her middle-aged frame, as he stood rooted, the pet sprang up to the gate, forcing the tantalizing trespasser to beat a hasty retreat. No less affected by her sensual gait in her retreat, the detective

lost his eyes to her, until she went out of his sight, but readily alive to her loss, he cursed himself for not sticking to the portico. Thus, obsessed with her, though, inexplicably, he rushed to the gate, only to see her turning the bend, even as Inspector Shakeel came into view on his Bajaj Pulsar.

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

## Chapter 2

### **Shakeel's Fixation**

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

"Where was it?" asked Shakeel.

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

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

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

"Who're the dead?"

"Man and his mistress, sir."

"What if it's a suicide pact?"

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

"What makes you think so?"

"Pravar told me, sir?"

"Who's he by the way?"

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

"What else did he say?"

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

"Let me see how long she can evade me," said Shakeel, getting up.

"Not long enough, sir," said Karim stepping aside.

When the duo entered the drawing room of that dwelling at 13, Red Hills, Pravar had drawn their attention to two empty glasses and a half-empty Teacher's Scotch bottle on the teapoy, with *kaara boondi* for company. When Shakeel surveyed the scene there, Pravar ushered them into the adjacent bedroom, where Madhu and Mala lay dead on a double cot bed. Soon, as the forensic squad, present by then, was at work, providing Radha's photograph to Shakeel, Pravar made out a case of her poisoning the couple.

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

But in spite of her pleas of innocence, Shakeel, influenced by Pravar's assertions, could not but see her hand in the double murder, and so arraigned her as the sole suspect. Not only that, even though his sustained custodial interrogation failed to crack her, believing in her guilt, so as to extracting her confession, he brought every police trick up his sleeve into play, including the third degree, but to no avail. Eventually however, he had to set her free, owing to the judicial intervention, but yet he failed to free himself from his sense of failure to pin her down to the murder of her man and his mistress. As he was cut up thus, seeing Dhruva's ad in *The Deccan Chronicle* for a 'lady sleuth to assist him', he had a premonition that she might try to secure the position to insulate herself. So as to preempt her move, he had set out that evening to 9, Castle Hills, even in that inclement weather.

While Dhruva was grappling with that sum and substance of Shakeel's recollection of the bygone incident, the cop said in a lighter vein that if she were to come under the detective's wings, it could as well portend a romantic opening for him in his middle-age.

"When you began, I too thought that a murderess on the run makes an ideal prey to any womanizing cop like you that is from what I've heard of you" said Dhruva jocularly; and then assuming a serious look he wanted to know from the cop if he had noticed a pretty woman at the bend. But picking up Shakeel's blank look, Dhruva said in jest that he had expected the cop to have an eye for women, if not an ear to the underworld. And to Dhruva's light-hearted banter, Shakeel said that though he fancied himself as a womanizer, from what he had heard about him, he was no match to him. Dismissing all that as exaggerated hearsay, the detective led the cop into the study, where the latter poured out the problems the death of Madhu, and Mala posed to the investigation.

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

Unable to hide his admiration for the unknown woman, when Dhruva said as to how such a steely woman could have allowed herself to be so ill-treated, Shakeel said what if, as a wounded tigress, she prowled on its prey in the garb of a lamb. With the detective evincing a keen interest in the perplexing case, the relieved cop savored the hot *pakodas* that Raju had fetched, all the while detailing his investigation that led him nowhere. However, when he ended his account by stating that the old guard, Appa Rao, told him that Radha reminded him of Mithya, whom Dhruva could not bring to book, the detective, with a perceptible change in his demeanor, dismissed it as learning curve. But as Shakeel persisted with the topic, Dhruva said that it was better they skipped it for it involved a dead woman, and when Raju served them some Darjeeling tea, he changed the topic to the politics of the day that was after committing himself to solving the intriguing case.

Long after Shakeel had left him, Dhruva, having delved into his memory bank, was at fathoming the perplexing present.

Could the trespasser be the murderess after all! But then, given his focus on her, surely, if indeed it were she, Shakeel wouldn't have failed to spot her from a mile, even though the weather was foggy for a proper sight. And in spite of her compelling face, he

himself might fail to recognize her if he were to espy her again before the contours of her exquisite frame would have turned hazy in his memory. Was it possible that she was indeed innocent save Shakeel's silly theories; if it were indeed Radha, what had brought her to his gate; did she, as the cop thought, come to seduce him so as to stall Shakeel's future maneuvers? If it were so, why should she have been so tentative to begin with only to beat a hasty-retreat in the end? Could she be as ingenuous as Mithya though she seemed as seductive; would history repeat itself after all? Well, only time would tell; he thought.

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

### **Chapter 3**

#### ***Ranjit's Predicament***

As Dhruva stepped into the anteroom, he came face to face with a handsome man with an anxious face that bore the apprehensions of one who feared for the life and limb of a dear one. When the visitor introduced himself as Ranjit, the owner of the *Oasis Builders*, assessing the middle-aged man as self-assured, Dhruva gave him a questioning look. But as Ranjit said that he came to seek his help in freeing Kavya, his thirty-six-year-old wife, kidnapped that very afternoon, Dhruva said in jest that he was not in cohorts with the kidnappers. Hiding his irritation, as Ranjit told him that his ad for a 'lady sleuth' had led him to the Castle Hills, Dhruva in wonder led him into the study, where Raju fetched them some steaming tea.

Ranjit said that he lives with his childless spouse in the *Spandan*, their bungalow in Jubilee Hills; while he is an engineer, she has a L.L.B. added to M.A. in English, and yet at his behest, she remained a homemaker for he was averse to a working wife. Of late though, having become a bored housewife, as she was keen on becoming a criminal lawyer, he didn't stall her from enrolling at the Bar, and yesterday, as she chanced to see Dhruva's ad for a 'lady sleuth', she felt that a short stint as his 'assistant' could come in handy in her career pursuit as a criminal lawyer. Aware though he was about the hazards such an occupation posed, as there was no way of stopping her for once she makes up her mind, there was no going back for her, damn the consequences. So, on the way to his office, he posted her application for the post that very morning, of course, without visualizing that by the evening, he would be seeking the advertiser's help in rescuing the applicant from her kidnappers! But as Ranjit said that he was unable to fathom the vicissitudes of fate, the unexpected development made Dhruva ponder over the imponderables of life.

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

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

Ranjitji, ensure your presence tomorrow evening at the Tanesha statue on the Tank Bund from four to six in dark trousers and a white shirt to convey your consent to pay three-crore rupees in thousand denominations (less luggage, more comfort, for us all) to reclaim your wife. Thereafter, you have only four days to exchange your black money with your bright wife; so whenever you are ready with the money for the barter before the deadline that is, be present at the Tanesha between five and eight in the evening (mind the dress code) to take further instructions. But beware of involving the khakis as that would only fetch you your wife's body bag; it's no empty threat as you have her testimony hereunder. Also be warned, if you carry any mobile phone with you, we will take the booty as well as your wife over your dead body.

Yours expectantly,

Your wife's captor

Testified by

Sd/-

Kavya Ranjit

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

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

When Dhruva wanted to know Ranjit's financial position to pay the ransom, just in case its inevitable, he said that he came to seek his help as he did not have so much money to cough up, and that prompted Dhruva to say in jest that he was no moneylender; but as Ranjit offered to pay him half a million to bust the kidnappers, Dhruva said that it might come in handy as and when he handled the cases of the 'hand to mouths'. At that as Ranjit offered to take Dhruva to the *Spandan*, but in an auto for he made it to the Castle Hills by changing into a couple of them via a circuitous route, patting him for his presence of mind, Dhruva led him to his Esteem, and on their way to the Jubilee Hills in the snarling traffic, Ranjit narrated his life and times with his wife.

#### **Chapter 4**

##### ***Rags to Riches***

Kavya, a child prodigy, was the only offspring of a financially hard-pressed couple from Kovvur, on the banks of the Godavari. As her parents went to lengths to groom her well, she began to live up to their expectations, and that prompted them to shift to Hyderabad to cater to her big-ticket talent. While her father became a clerk in a real estate firm, her mother took to catering for a couple of working women's hostels, she strained her every nerve to top the school. But coinciding with her entry into the college, her father ventured into the real estate business, which by the time of her graduation in arts, grew into *Oasis Builders*.

Soon, her parents made her marriage their dining table-talk; her mother, wanting her daughter to have a better start than she herself had, was bent upon a well-heeled groom, but her father, still smarting from the snubs of his poor-groom days, vowed to give her hand to 'a promising nobody with a potential to become somebody', as he put it. Un-enamored of riches, as Kavya sided with her father, he soon zeroed in on Ranjit, and bowled by his looks, she batted for him against her mother's objections. However, in deference to her mother's wishes, she married Ranjit in Lord Balaji's precincts at Tirupathi, but sadly, in the return journey, as her parents were killed in a road mishap, the *Oasis Builders* too landed in the groom's ownership lap.

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

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

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



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

Back home, after a quick shower, with his favorite Old Monk with Thumbs Up for company, Dhruva began working on various moves of the endgame, and soon succeeded in affecting a mental checkmate of Kavya's captors. But, the thought that she may not have any stomach left for the risky endeavors of a sleuth made him feel like he was back to square one in his quest for a capable hand.

However, after an unappetizing dinner as he retired to bed thinking about both the women in the same vein, he wondered if the woman 'at the gate' was indeed Radha, and felt that it was difficult to imagine her as a murderess. He thought; if only Shakeel had showed him her photograph that Pravar gave him, and wondered why he failed seek it himself? But feeling that it won't behoove well to ask for it afresh, he cursed his lack of the presence of mind, but nevertheless thought that maybe, as a seductress, Radha could rival Mithya but there could be no temptresses like Kavya for sure. Besides, won't Kavya be an invaluable asset even if she were half as cerebral as her husband pictured her? When it suits him to have either Kavya or Radha to assist him, what a bonus it could be if both of them joined him. Won't it be real fun with both of them around but given the attendant jealousies, it could as well be a hard grind for him. But then, after all this mess, would she like to join him?

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

## **Chapter 5**

### ***Dhruva's Dilemma***

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

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

Given her eagerness for the job, Dhruva felt that waiting for his reply, Rani could be right up there at the post office, and so he penned a call-letter post-haste and hurried Raju on the errand wondering what the future had in store for him. However, seeing Raju's back, as he readily picked up Kavya's post, he was amused at his fickle mindedness for having given precedence to an unknown woman over someone he fancied.

'Added to the stream of boldness, isn't there a strain of rashness to Kavya's persona?' he thought folding her letter. 'If not for the fiasco, wouldn't she have filled the gap that Mithya's death had created in his professional life? Why foreclose the option, as all it takes is to see that my interview call greets her on her return to her *Spandan*, and who knows, after the dust settles down, she may not be averse to answer my call. Whatever, Ranjit should be cautioned not to let her know about my involvement in the *Operation Checkmate* for even if I were to click with Radha, nay Rani, why shouldn't Kavya provide the second string to my investigative bow? What if I fall in love with her as well; so what, that would be the second one to the Cupid's thing, what a welcome prospect that could be? But then, why place the cart before the horse, or horses to be precise, when life would take its own course anyway.'

When the clock struck four, attired in black trousers and a white shirt - Dhruva thought of dressing like Ranjit, and be present nearby the Tanesha statue every day till the D-day to let Kavya's captors take him to be a regular - he stepped out of his abode to step into an auto. Soon reaching the Tank Bund, and alighting from it at the Nannaya statue, he walked up to the nearby Siddhendrayogi's; and finding Ranjit at the Tanesha's, he himself settled nearby on the lush green lawns where with a book in hand, and seemingly engrossed in it, he kept a hawk's eye on the traffic and the passers-by alike.

Then around five, a white Maruti Zen, driven by a twenty-something guy, slowed down as it neared the Tanesha from the Ranigunj side, and before it was six, as that car of Karnataka registration made two more rounds in like fashion, Dhruva thought the one at the wheel could be the driving force behind Kavya's kidnap. Since the suspect came alone to pick up Ranjit's signal of consent, the detective reasoned that his accomplice, possibly the woman who penned the ransom note, might have held back holding Kavya in captivity. Though he suspected that the Zen could be a stolen one, yet he called up Shakeel to pass on the vehicle number, after which, he left the scene leaving Ranjit alone.

Back home, as Dhruva awaited Rani's expected arrival, Shakeel came to him seeking his helping hand to close in on an inter-state counterfeit-note racket that came to the fore just then. Though he was disinclined to leave home lest he should miss out on Rani, if she were to show up, yet his proclivity to face professional challenges got the better of his need for courting the woman he enamored; so, briefing Raju as to how to deal with her, in case she turned up, he accompanied the cop to the Saifabad Police Station.

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

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

What with his obsession for Rani that accentuated the pain of his year-long loneliness occasioned by Mithya's death growing by the hour; he became pensive thinking that she might have developed second thoughts about joining him. Soon though, as his thoughts insensibly turned to Kavya, he felt that had Oscar Wilde espied her, perhaps he might have paraphrased his smoking quote as an ode to her - the perfect example of a perfect beauty - and began to wonder what would have happened had she, instead of being kidnapped, made it to 9, Castle Hills.

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

## [Chapter 6](#)

## ***The Gatecrasher***

While Dhruva was still lounging in his bed, as Raju announced the arrival of a middle-aged woman, wondering whether it could be Rani, he asked him to make her feel at home in the study before he could meet her there. Thereafter, as Dhruva took his sweet time to put his best foot forward, Raju began lifting him to the skies before her, but when he heard approaching footsteps, he left the scene to make way for his master's entry.

Sensing the import of the moment, even as she stood up in all eagerness, realizing at the threshold that she was the one he was craving for, ogling at her unabashedly as he turned ecstatic in his approach, enamored of him, she turned coy, making him all the more covetous. What's more, as he advanced towards her, bowled by his masculinity, and as if to quench their common thirst in the sands of lust, she too rushed to him as one would towards an oasis in a desert. So, while he opened his arms impulsively, parting her lips sanguinely, she sank into his arms amorously, and as if to cement their union, he closed in on them passionately. Then, induced by his ardency, though her femininity came to the fore, and his dream came true, she unlocked his lips, as if to regain her breath. Thereby, as he crooned into her ears that ever since he saw her at the threshold of his domain, he had a premonition that she would come back to him, averring that she just tried to test the waters before venturing into the whirlpool of his life, she reached for his lips all again.

Then, gripping her in his ardent embrace, when he asked her if she was Radha, the alleged murderess, having crooned into his ear that she was Rani the man-eater, she bit it coquettishly. Writhing in pain, as he told her that he fell in love with her as Radha the killer, she said alluringly that she came for the kill and so he was better be on guard against her ambush. But feigning alarm, as he withdrew from her, taking his arm enticingly, as if to reassure him, she said that he might as well banish Radha from his mind and engage her with single-mindedness; and as he hugged her endearingly, smug in his embrace, she said coyly that she craved for a live-in with him. Then as he told her in jest that he needed to take the consent of Raju and his wife Vimala, who attended on him, she said teasingly that she would beseech them to 'let her in' so that she could 'let him in'. When he told her that it shouldn't be a hassle for Raju was a retired constable who was ever devoted to him, she said in half jest that she hoped to be blessed with a like devotion from his master; and as if to demonstrate his intent, going down on his knees and hugging her at her declivity, he assured her more of it. Thus enthralled by his romanticism, as she lifted him to her bosom, he led her into his bedroom, where, giving herself in coition, she goaded him on to their orgasm.

After a sensually fulfilling time followed by a sumptuous lunch, when he went into his siesta, she left for her dwelling to fetch her belongings.

And for his part, waking up at three, he left for the Tank Bund, and as soon as he sat with a book in hand at the Tanesha statue to monitor the moving vehicles, he cited a blue Santro slowing down; noticing that it was the same guy who made rounds in the white Maruti Zen the other day, he could discern his puzzled look at finding a different character in the stipulated dress code there. However, at five, after making a couple of rounds, as the explorer sped away towards Ranigunj, the intruder in satisfaction left the place to reach home in anticipation.

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

game for it, she opted for the 'ladies' Gin when he offered her 'manly' Rum, and having had a couple of drinks they ate Vimala's 'spicy' preparations with great relish only to rush into his bedroom. What with her company affording him a regular night for the first time after Mithya's demise; he had gone into deep sleep thinking about the regular day to follow.

Waking up late and having had an exhilarating day with the dotting live-in, in the evening, he took her along with him to the Tank Bund, where she strolled around the place and he sat near the Tanesha, waiting for the rigmarole to begin. When the guy, this time in the white Maruti Zen, slowed down near him, he could clearly see that he was puzzled by his presence that day as well. However, after making a couple of rounds, as that chap drove away for the day, Dhruva joined Rani and took her for a boat-ride in the abutting Hussainsagar. Though she wanted to hear about the nitty-gritty of the *Operation Checkmate* in the making, so as not to spoil their joy-ride, he said that she might as well see the drama unfold itself on the D-day the next day.

## Chapter 7

### **Operation Checkmate**

When it was 4 P.M the D-day, though Dhruva was raring to go, Rani was in no hurry to desert her dressing table; but when he began hurrying her, as she hastened down the stairs, she slipped on the staircase. Even though she said that she was fine, yet he drove her to the Hyderabad Nursing Home, where the doctor ruled out even a hairline fracture, but ignoring her pleas to be taken along with him, he sent her home with Raju, whom he brought along with them.

Shortly thereafter, reaching the nearby Tank Bund, he quickly made it to the Siddhendrayogi statue, and seeing the white Maruti Zen in the parking bay, he realized that the game was on though there was none to be seen around. But even before he could settle down on the lawns aside the majestic statue, Ranjit drove his Audi into the same parking bay, and alighting from his car with two bulging travel bags, and visibly nervous, he passed by Dhruva towards the nearby Tanesha statue. Soon, beginning in trickles, as people started flocking to the place to occupy vantage points on the sprawling lawns as well as on the tank-side benches, as if on cue, a handful of fast food vendors descended upon the scene to spread all over; even as they were trying to induce those present to taste their recopies, the *toy-wallahs*, who followed them, did not lag behind in tempting the kids with fancy playthings.

When a fast food vendor, apparently in disguise, posited his *chaat* basket near the Tanesha statue, seeing him ill at ease in the calling, Dhruva knew that he was indeed the one to be marked. As the sun began to set on the Hussainsagar Lake, the vendor went up to Ranjit and preparing some *chaat*, he began chitchatting with him; soon, handing over the stuff in a paper-plate to Ranjit, the imposter, on the sly, passed on his mobile to him. With a satisfied look on his face as Ranjit unzipped both the travel bags, elated, the guy took away the mobile from him, and having connected it to someone; he gave it back to Ranjit, who seemed relieved as he held it to his ear. But as Ranjit tended to hold on to it, the guy snatched it away from him, and waited in the wings without taking his eyes off him. Soon, when it got a little darker, he signaled to Ranjit to go down the staircase in the backside that led to the road below; so when Ranjit picked up the luggage and ventured into the vault of that staircase, the guy called someone on his mobile; and abandoning his wares as is where, as he too followed suit, Dhruva reached for his mobile.

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

Soon thereafter, as Ranjit too passed him by with Kavya, his eyes followed her all the way to the Audi; what with her glowing persona and pleasing poise, even in that dull setting, appealed to his romanticism, he could not help but divine her provocative figure in her evocative gait; and finding her enchanting in her state of confusion, he began wondering how enticing she could be in the moments of her excitation. So, when Shakeel called him to inform him about the capture of the kidnapper, he was still under the mesmeric spell of Kavya's ethereal charms that paled his photographic visualizations into insignificance.

However, the breaking news from Shakeel that the culprit turned out to be Pravar diverted his mind to the mysterious Radha, the suspected murderess. Amazed though at the development, he turning business-like, wanted the cop to send someone to pick up Pravar's *chaat* basket, whatever be its forensic worth; and waiting for a constable to come to pick up the thing, he called up Rani to enquire about the state of her 'leggy self'. Learning that she was jumping like a jack and was eager for the news, as he apprised her of the developments, she blamed him for having deprived her thrill of participation; and having cajoled her; he said in half jest that he hoped she would not hold it against him to deny him the thrill of their nocturnal indulgences.

## **Chapter 8**

### ***Foul on Pravar***

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

So, tuning into TV9, they began having their drinks; and in time, Shakeel was seen on the screen along with a handcuffed youth, whom he named as Pravar, the kingpin of the fake-note racket that he had busted that evening. As Karim laid some bundles of thousand-rupees notes on the table before a dazed Pravar, Shakeel boasted that the police would catch the other members of the gang sooner than later.

"I don't believe a word of that cop, why his body language spoke all lies," said Rani

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

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

"What struck me in the ransom note was the kidnappers' choice of the rendezvous that too at a time when it gets crowded the most," he said, switching off the TV and lighting a fresh cigar. "Maybe the idea was to enable the kidnappers to spot the cops in the *mufti*, if any, but still, it was risky as the police could lay in wait for them on either side of the Tank Bund. Wouldn't have the kidnappers taken that into account? It only suggested that they could hit upon a foolproof plan to facilitate the *Operation Exchange*. But why were they specific that Ranjit should wait near the Tanesha statue; surveying its environs, I could see a nearby vaulted staircase that led to the roadside Maisamma temple down below."

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

“How I wish I had met you then,” he said.

“Why, it’s better late than never,” she said.

“But not in the affairs of heart; thank god we have aligned before it was too late to write home about it,” he said squeezing her hand. “Well, given the location of the staircase, it wasn’t difficult to visualize the envisaged plan of exchanging the *maal* for the moolah; even as the male captor would deal with Ranjit on the Tank Bund, his female accomplice would hold Kavya on the road below, usually desolated at that hour. And once Ranjit is made to go down the staircase with the ransom, Kavya could be led up for the operation exchange midway with the violators blocking the way both ways. Even if someone happened to use the staircase then, the Ranjits could be silenced with advance threats, and what is more, the double entry or exit, as the case may be, affords the kidnapers a two-way get-away in the escape vehicles, one parked on the Tank Bund, and the other stationed nearby Maisamma Temple.”

“Isn’t it foolproof?” said Rani, “But how come they came a cropper.”

“No denying that but ironically it’s the brilliance of the plan that betrayed their idea behind it,” said Dhruva. “Initially I thought of freeing Kavya, by arraigning her captor without her partner on the Tank Bund getting wind of it but as you know, by then, Shakeel laid his hands on those fake notes in the *Operation Moolah* though the culprits gave him the slip. I don’t know why, but I got a naughty idea; what if the fake money was clothed as ransom amount and the kidnapper pictured as the kingpin of the counterfeit racket? Though Shakeel was excited at that prospect, yet he was afraid of the pitfalls, and it took a great deal of effort on my part to make him fall in line.”

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

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

## **Chapter 9**

### ***Stockholm Syndrome***

Next day, when Ranjit reached 9, Castle Hills, Dhruva was playing shuttle badminton with Rani in its backyard, and as Raju announced his arrival, Dhruva playfully told Rani that he would like to flaunt her before the visitor. Turning coquettish, she told him that she had no eyes for any other man, and not to be outdone, he said that had she been there on the Tank Bund the other day, Ranjit would have lost his eyes for her, thereby putting Pravar in a fix. She said joyously that though she was flattered, she was eager to know how Kavya could have spent the time with her captors, and he told her that she better eavesdrop as he closeted with her man. Chiding him for wanting to spoil her morals, she got into the swimming pool, and he went into the study to meet the visitor.

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

At length, cajoled by Dhruva that all that would come to a pass, Ranjit placed the Kavya-cards on the table - in the pouring rain, around three that day, she stepped out of the *Spandan* wondering how to hire an auto; what a hassle it was in Hyderabad as the auto-*wallahs* tended to veto the *savaaris*. So, when a youth drove his auto straight up to her, thinking it was a Godsend, she got into it, and to spare herself the spatter, she gratefully accepted his offer to unwind the Rexene windshields. Not long after they turned the bend, as a well-drenched young woman was beckoning for an auto, he asked her if she would like to accommodate the hapless lass, out of humanitarian consideration, she consented to his proposition.

However, the next thing that she could recall was that she woke up in an alien place with the pair around, who, after introducing themselves as Pravar and Natya, began to press her to disclose her man's monetary worth. Though she kept mum initially but as he warned her that she better revealed that before he forced her to tell about her man's manly worth as well, she retorted that it was unbecoming of a man to trick a woman on the sly. But when he asked Natya to leave him alone to enable him to assess her womanly worth, afraid of rape, she agreed to cooperate. When he thought of a ransom of five-crore rupees, she told him that he might forget about it; and even as he scaled it down to three-crores, yet as she protested, but he told her that she might count her days if her man was not prepared to cough up even that much.

While confining her in the guestroom of a desolated house on the outskirts, and having warned her against any misadventure, they took turns to guard her, lest she should give them a slip. Though Pravar was younger to her by twelve years, but whenever she was alone with him, she was ever in fright that he might turn eager for her; and during the nights, though he was fast asleep on the floor, holding the rope that tied both her hands, keeping an eye on him, lying on the cot, she used to keep awake all night. However, he always tried to win her sympathy by picturing his wayward life, and Natya too went out of her way to earn her goodwill by catering to her every need. So, when she told him that once freed, she might practice law, he said jocularly that if only she took his briefs, he would ensure that her wallet bulged like a pregnant womb. Well, his semantics only helped aggravate her lurking fear of rape that was at the back of her mind all the while - that was the long and short of Kavya's ordeal of a kidnap.

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

While Ranjit lamented that he was at a loss to understand Kavya's inexplicable behavior, cautioning him not to let her ever get wiser to the nuances of her rescue act, Dhruva counseled him to keep his cool while she got over her nerves. But harping on how the misadventure had upset his mate, Ranjit wondered of what avail it all was, and thus having put her rescuer on the back foot, he extricated himself from his commitment by handing the latter a cheque for a paltry twenty-thousand. Measuring Ranjit's meanness in that meager amount, yet the detective told him to call on him if he ever needed any help, and as an after-thought enquired about the fate of his call letter to his wife. Glad for being saved from playing the blame game, Ranjit said that having read it, without a comment, his wife had tucked it in her handbag.

Seeing Ranjit's back, as Dhruva turned pensive, Rani, failing to enliven him with her coquetry, nevertheless, managed to cajole him into breaking his silence; he said that he was worried that the foisted case on Pravar might end up hurting Kavya in wayward ways; and urged by Rani to elaborate his conjecture, he elucidated the intriguing aspects of the 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

"It's a psychic state in which the kidnapped turn sympathetic to their captors after they are freed," he said. "It is said that the survival instinct activates the defensive mechanism in the captives to let them identify themselves with the captors to ward off possible violence against them. In that state of emotional stress and physical duress, accentuated by a sense of helplessness dominated by fear, the captives magnify small acts of kindness by their captors. Wonder how I failed to factor that!"

"What an irony is that!" said Rani.

"Courtesy those four days in Pravar's captivity, apparently her latent sympathies for the underdogs resurged," he said pensively. "Maybe, she came to identify herself more with her depraved captor rather than with her mean man, who came to enjoy her father's bequeath by default."

"I've heard of a story, fact, or fiction I can't say," said Rani. "Seeing a murderer being paraded to the gallows, it was love at first sight for a girl, and what's more, she wanted to marry him before he was hanged, and so begged the king to spare his life; my memory fails me at that."

"Dear, it's all about the perplexities of human psychology," said Dhruva. "Coming back to Kavya, it is possible that in Ranjit's move to deny Pravar the ransom, she could have seen the propensity of the rich to deprive the poor. Now that Pravar was falsely implicated, her sympathy for him would have acquired weird emotional wings as well; and given Ranjit's presumed deceitfulness towards Pravar, she might begin to lean towards her ex-captor even more. What is more, where it all might lead her to, her fate only would know; how I wish she wouldn't become another Patty Hearst; you may know that Hearst even became an accomplice of her captors to assist them, of all things, in bank robberies. May God forbid that to Kavya, but the silver-lining is that Hearst could come out of her psychic aberration to disown her gory association. Maybe, as I created the mess, I may have to clear it up as well."

## **Chapter 10**

### ***An Aborted Affair***

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



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

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

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

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

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

What with Natya having come up trumps in the intense cross-examination that followed, there was no way the public prosecutor could have pulled the rug from under her feet as no case of kidnap was registered against Pravar or her. As the judge was quick in passing strictures against Shakeel, making him curse Dhruva for once, he nevertheless asked the public prosecutor to seek time for further investigation. Thus when the judge ordered the release of Pravar on bail, all applauded Kavya's sterling performance, and as a grateful Pravar thanked her no end, an appalled Ranjit led her out of the court hall.

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

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