

Fire in the Valley of Flowers

By

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Dedicated to

Mamoni and Bapi

Special thanks to my whole family

I

Gingerly, she tried to open the door to her office. The watchman was nowhere to be seen. He was probably lazing around with his no-good friends in the nearby dilapidated godown. Her two-room office was in the ground floor of a four-storied building that housed about five other small companies. She glanced at the name-plate on the door. It read I.V. Associates. I stood for her – Indira and V was for Varun, her business partner and 3 am friend. The plate had gathered a fair amount of dust in these few months – three months to be precise. Varun was never a stickler for cleanliness. She took out her blue silk scarf from her handbag and cleared the dust. She put a loving hand on the name plate. She would now put her life and soul into her work and forget about everything else.

Still the door to her office wouldn't open. She double-checked the key, but with no success. The remaining offices in that building had another entrance that led to the main road. But this was a converted garage. So her office had a separate

entrance. And it worked out fine for them, because their cost accountancy audit firm had a different set of clients than the others in the building, which were mostly ITES start-ups.

She was about to give up and go home. It wouldn't have made any difference to the firm. Varun was managing it single-handed for the past three months. It had been those many months since her daughter's death. Varun had been a pillar of support during that time. It was him and her estranged husband, Ravi, who had talked her into resuming her job. True, it would not make her forget her loss, but at least she would come out of her depression if she started going to work again. She had not yet told anyone that she had actually decided to visit her office. She had wanted to surprise Varun.

As she turned away, she saw a man come running across the street. It was the watchman. He must have spotted her from afar and so was coming to meet her. He may not have expected to find her there so early in the morning. In fact it was a little early for her. But from then on, she would never be late again. She did not have to drop her daughter to school anymore. Thinking of this, a lump formed in her throat. She was sure the

watchman knew about her daughter's death. It was all over the newspapers. So she didn't meet his eyes. She was afraid that he might be inquisitive and ask her about something that she was not ready to answer.

But the watchman was a street-smart young man. He said nothing to embarrass her and instead offered her a set of keys. Apparently Varun had lost his set of keys sometime back and had got all the locks changed. She was surprised, since he could easily have used her set. But she brushed away the matter and opened the door, after thanking the watchman.

The inside of the office was a mess. This was something over which she and Varun were always at loggerheads. She liked to work in a clean environment, with everything in its place and neat and shiny. But Varun couldn't care less. There were papers everywhere. The files were scattered all over the place. Even her computer's cabinet had become a make-shift table. She shook her head in disgust and started to clean up the place. It took her an hour and a half to get all the things in order like the old times... No, not exactly like old times, because things would never be the same again with her dear Mandira not with her anymore.

Mandira was her fourteen year old daughter. After her messy divorce from Ravi, Mandira was her centre of existence. She worked night and day to make her daughter's life as smooth as possible. She did not want Mandira to suffer because some of the downright bad and regrettable decisions she had taken in life. Initially she was resentful towards Ravi for shirking his responsibility towards them, but gradually she came to terms with it.

Her marriage with Ravi didn't work out because they were both very young and immature. They had married against their parents' wishes just after completing their education. They were still in the learner's phase in their marriage, when she had found herself with child. She then had to grow up and become responsible overnight. But Ravi still wanted to enjoy life. He was afraid of giving up his carefree lifestyle and thus became fractious. He gladly let Indira go, so he would not be bogged down with life's challenges and the pressure of raising a kid.

After so many years, she and Ravi were in a more comfortable space and were friendly and civil with each other. In fact she was now actually thankful

towards Ravi for giving up the custody rights for Mandira, since her life had begun to revolve around her daughter.

She was a Super Mom, managing her firm and her home with equal élan for ten long years. True, she could make this possible only because Mandira was a very well-behaved child with not a single tantrum-throwing bone in her body. She had raised her daughter well, into a soft-spoken and mild-mannered teenager. She sometimes felt her daughter to have matured well above her years. But she was obviously wrong. She knew her daughter to be an introvert, but she could not have ever guessed what exactly was happening in her adolescent daughter's life. And it was a very big mistake, which she had to pay the price for, with her only daughter's precious life.

She truly regretted her absence from her daughter daily life. She thought her studious daughter was happy with the books that she kept a steady supply of. She could not have guessed that Mandira might have been depressed, to the extent of taking that final step. What would she not have given to the devil, for the chance of one heart to heart conversation with her beloved daughter? She knew

in her heart that these were baseless fantasies that threatened to shake her conviction.

She frequently felt bad about her long hours at work. But she really could do nothing about it. She, they, had to take on a lot of clients in order to have a decent income. Moreover she had a daughter to support. Initially Ravi wasn't very forthcoming with his child support. Probably he was also struggling financially. But later when his business sort of took off, he had arranged for a fixed sum to be deposited in his daughter's bank account towards her education expenses. But this wasn't all to meet all her expenses. Also, the market for cost accountants was very competitive. If she did not offer the best possible services, she was at risk of losing her clients to someone else who was willing to do the same work at throwaway prices. Thus she was unavailable to her daughter as a confidante. Now she knew that this was the only plausible thing for her to have done – to be there for her daughter. But three months ago she might have laughed off this suggestion.

It was exactly three months since she had found Mandira hanging from the ceiling fan of their bedroom. It was a rude shock for her when she entered home that night. They had a disagreement

in the morning over some trivial issue, what, she couldn't remember clearly. Had she realised what would be the outcome, she would surely have tried to reason with her daughter. But it was no use crying over spilt milk.

The signs were all there, but she did not see them then. Mandira had retreated into a shell further, if that were at all possible, in her last days. She had no friends and was usually always immersed in some book or the other. But lately she was strangely preoccupied and distracted. Being a single mother who was raising her daughter single-handedly, she was too busy to raise the alarm. She credited all the signs to her daughter's recent hormonal changes due to puberty.

The police hadn't found anything suspicious. There wasn't a single clue for them to act upon. The forensic experts did not report any foul play. Mandira's suicide note was addressed to her, simply saying "Mom, I'm sorry for having let you down". Even the post mortem report said that the death was due to hanging. Too bad it isn't yet possible to scan a dead brain to find out more about the emotional turmoil that drives a person to commit suicide. She wanted to take Mandira's head in her lap and assure her that she would never

feel let-down by her dear daughter. How could her precious daughter not know this! Apparently they both did not really know each other. She was still trying to understand her daughter, even three months after her death.

She shook her head as if to clear herself from these depressing thoughts. She had decided to start her life anew, and she was going to do it. True, her loss was irreplaceable. But her firm was also like her child, and she had decided to nurture it from then on. Varun was an equal partner in the firm and was quite a diligent worker, but he was also whimsical. That was what she reasoned for his occasional long absences from work. He was her friend from college and was always beside her when she needed him. He was an average student, who always scraped through with the minimum marks, in all his exams. But he was her faithful friend and she could count on him in most difficult situations. After all, he seemed to have connections in most of the important places. He was responsible for bringing in most of the new clients.

When her marriage fell apart, Varun had entertained hopes of something more in their relationship. But she wasn't ready to give it a try.

She might seem selfish, but she was afraid of losing her best friend. Moreover she was thankful that Varun did not persist on winning her affections. She was a broken soul after her marriage disintegrated, and now she was an empty shell after she lost her daughter.

She tried to start her computer, but it made some monotonous beeps and the operating system just refused to load. Her computer had gathered dust for the last few months. Probably that had resulted in a system malfunction. After a few failed attempts she gave it up and walked to the other room to Varun's computer. It was still early and he wasn't expected for another hour or so. At the very onset, they had decided that they would not use the office computers for any private purposes. So they had no qualms about accessing each other's computers. It was year-ending time, and all their clients needed to submit their audited accounts for taxation and other purposes. She knew Varun was struggling hard to get all the work done by the stipulated time. Now that she had decided to resume work, she did not want to waste any time.

She booted Varun's computer and sat down to check the various company accounts that were saved in the hard drive. The more she checked, the

more agitated she became. None of the audit work was complete yet. Huge amounts of work still remained pending and they had very little time in hand. Apparently, the picture didn't tally with what Varun had been pacifying her with for so many days. She was really mad at him, so much so, that when Varun actually entered the office, she greeted him with the choicest abuses that she could muster from her normally polite vocabulary. He looked as if he had been punched unawares below the belt. He turned white and then recovered sufficiently within a few seconds to jokingly ask her what was the matter.

She demanded an explanation regarding the incomplete audit work. Varun let out a laugh and asked her not to worry. He assured her that the files she was checking were old ones. He was working on them at home in his personal computer. He was planning to complete them and bring them over to the office in his pen-drive in a couple of days, as he wasn't aware of her decision to resume work. She was relieved.

Varun then informed her that he was going out to get some breakfast and invited her to join him. Even though she was feeling hungry, she was too tired after such an exhausting morning. So she

decided to stay back and asked Varun to get some coffee for her. She was beginning to have a headache. Hopefully a mug of coffee would help clear her head. Varun left after depositing a package on his table. He informed her over his shoulders that it was some audit reports to be delivered to UMSL Pvt. Ltd.

Had he said anything about the package being personal, she wouldn't have touched it ever. Since Varun had mentioned it to be work related, her curiosity arose. She wanted to see how he had managed the audit work all by himself without any help from her. So she opened the package, but found only a few DVDs inside it. She decided they must be the soft copies of the audit reports. She took one of the DVDs and inserted it into Varun's disk drive. What she saw made her want to throw up.

There was Mandira staring out of the screen with not a thread on her body. She was stunned. Then when she regained control over her limbs, she frantically checked frame after frame and there was Mandira all over the pictures in various poses, and all in the nude. But her mother-eyes made her see what was probably imperceptible to others – Mandira's frightened eyes. Angrily she took out

the DVD from the disk drive and threw it on the floor and stamped it with all her might, destroying it completely. Oh, who had done this to her poor Mandira? Was it Varun? How come he came to possess these DVDs? All these questions were driving her insane. Sadly she realised that the answers were more or less obvious.

She fought back her angry tears and checked the other DVDs. There were nude pictures of many other young girls. There were also some revolting videos which she could not bring herself to watch any more. She held her head in despair. She couldn't blame herself enough for not knowing what was going on under her very nose. She had trusted Varun so, and he had mis-utilised her trust to become the proverbial wolf in the sheep-pen.

She heard Varun's voice from the doorway, announcing her coffee. In her momentary lapse of reason, she snatched what came nearest to her grip – a paper knife lying on the table, ran towards him and drove it into his stomach with all her might. He let out a startled scream, staggered forward, trying to increase the distance between him and Indira and ended up near his desk. When his eyes fell on the computer screen, the shocked expression on his face morphed slowly into full

comprehension. Still clutching his chest, he simply fell backwards on the floor muttering “I’m sorry”.

She rushed at him again, demanding to know why he had done such a heinous crime and betrayed her trust so. But he only mumbled something about lots of money and little girls being easy targets. She was so furious that she repeatedly kicked him, while he cowered to protect himself from the blows. He was losing blood fast and was on the brink of losing consciousness. She stopped her assault for a moment to ask him one question that kept gnawing at her from the time she first laid her eyes on those DVDs. Was that the reason for Mandira’s suicide? Varun did not have to answer. His face told her what she had dreaded to hear. She yanked the knife out from his stomach and drove it back into his breast. That was for Mandira.

II

She sat in the Café Coffee House, sipping her coffee and staring out of the window. The blood-stained knife lay next to her handbag, covered with her blue silk scarf. Her lawyer was sitting across her table. She had called up Ravi and asked him to meet her at the café along with some press representatives. She had also called the police and was waiting for them to arrive. She intended to turn herself over to the law, but not before letting the world know about the matter. She had no reason to live, but she couldn't die in peace knowing that many more Mandiras were waiting to happen. The perpetrators of child-porn had to be brought to justice.

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