

# A NEW FAITH

by

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# Chapter One

Alia felt as if someone had split her head open with an axe. The pain was instantaneous and reached every neuron in her brain. She, literally, felt like stars were shining in front of her tightly shut eyes. If it didn't ease up soon, she thought that she would faint. Then, almost magically, it began to ebb. And she could hear a voice. No, voices. They all seemed to be yelling at her.

"Wake up, Alia!" Maria was gently shaking her. Maria's face was grim. When the investigation into Sequoia's first-ever murder had stalled, Maria had noticed that Alia started taking sleeping pills. As days had turned into weeks, both the frequency and dosage of the sleeping pills had gone up. Last night, Alia must have taken an, especially, high dose.

"Uhhh... whaaat?" Alia mumbled. She managed to identify the owner of the absolutely livid voice blasting from the speaker of her phone. It was Sonia, her boss and the police chief of Sequoia.

"If you don't answer your damned phone right now, Alia, I swear I am going to turn you back into a beat cop. ALIA?!!"

Alia meekly answered the phone, "yes... yes... I am here, boss."

"AAAH... FINALLY!" thundered Sonia.

"We have another one and I need you to get down here ASAP."

"Huh?! Yes... yes..."

"Meet me at the park on Rose and Vine in ten minutes. I got here five minutes ago. I had your team call you but to no avail. And since when did you start ignoring the official calls? No, don't answer that. We shall talk about it later. Just get here ASAP."

"Of course. I will be right there."

Through the haze of sleep and flashes of pain, Alia groggily tried to sit up. She had been lying with her legs and arms splayed on the floor as if she had dived off the bed.

That fucking dream. No! She should be calling it a damn nightmare now. She had

dived at the end of it. Probably, for the umpteenth time. And obviously in the latest instance, she had dived in the real world, too, because of which she had hit her head on the edge of the side table.

She put the phone down and gingerly got off the floor. She heard the soft whoosh of the flush and then Maria floated back into the bedroom.

“How many did you take last night?”

By then, Alia had managed to stand up by resting on that same side table which had also been the source of the shining stars that continued to blink, albeit dimly, inside her head. She slowly turned to face Maria and shook her head.

“Really? You were out like a light last evening. You didn’t even taste the baklava that I made specially for you,” she was pouting.

“I used orange blossom instead of rose water and that new peach-infused honey.”

Alia mumbled something. She was not sure if she could take a step in any direction without falling down. That blinding pain in her head had diminished but not gone away. It was making everything wobbly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. I am sorry... I was... y’know... tired... and I... Fuck... Please can you get me an aspirin?”

Alia walked with deliberate steps to the wardrobe and pulled on an ankle-length dark blue skirt. She rummaged around and snagged a frilly white top that Maria had exclusively designed for her.

“You look like shit. Wash your face and brush your teeth before you head out. You stink, too.”

Maria was saying all these things kindly. She was starting to get concerned with her partner’s overall demeanor.

“BTW - did she say that there was another death?”

Alia nodded from the bathroom. She splashed some cold water on her face and tried to

run a comb through her tangled hair. The comb merely snagged and made her wince. She gave up and just tied a bandana to cover up them up. She pecked Maria on the cheek and left.

In the first five years of her city's existence, there had been no deaths at all, let alone murders. And now, in one month, two had occurred. The first one was still unsolved and Alia was the lead investigator for it. No wonder she was having that same stupid dream - correction, nightmare - where she chased fleet-footed suspects all over the bloody place. Never catching them. The dream invariably ended with her grasping at thin air as the suspect got away. Sometimes, she had the distinct impression that her dream-self almost didn't want to catch the suspect and was intentionally falling just short. She shook her head in a determined manner. She did not need this kind of an attitude if she was to solve that case.

She shivered as she swiftly strode to the new crime scene. It was still summer, and yet there was a surprisingly chilly breeze. She should have picked up a cardigan to go with that linen top. But she really liked wearing that top on its own. Partly because it was handmade by Maria and Alia loved to show off her partner's craft; and partly because, it fit in a way that made Alia feel most comfortable. As if Maria knew each and every curve of her body which Maria most definitely did. And with that thought, her purposeful stride slackened into a stroll. Again, she shook her head to snap out of thoughts about Maria and picked up the pace.

Ever since she was a little girl, Alia wanted to become a detective. She had been absolutely smitten by the fictional detective from Australia, Miss Phryne Fisher. She had secretly watched all the episodes of that TV show on the tiny screen of her phone. Of course, the life of Phryne from 20th century Australia was impossibly different from Alia's life a century later in Iran. For starters, Phryne could do whatever the hell she wanted. Alia couldn't even step out of her home without wearing a hijab. Even with the hijab, a male relative had to accompany her at all times. And disclosing her sexuality to anyone at all would have been the fastest way of getting tortured to death. When she was a teenager, she had heard rumors about the massive protests that had engulfed Tehran where women had demanded more freedom. The government had, of course, brutally smashed the protest. Many people had died and many more had been jailed. If anything, the restrictions on women became even more draconian since then.

Somewhere in her fate though, she was destined to experience the life of Phryne. After moving to Sequoia, she was asked what she wanted to do. Without any hesitation, she had answered "Police". She had no prior experience of policing. So the first three years were mostly devoted to basic training coupled with simple duties such as patrolling. As her problem-solving talent became apparent, two years ago, she was asked to join the small team of detectives some of whom had a little bit of experience prior to Sequoia. She easily outshone her colleagues and was quickly promoted to the rank of a senior detective in the squad. She loved her job and was excellent at it. Every time any

thought of her past life crossed her mind, she thanked her stars that she got the opportunity to move to Sequoia, a place where she could just be herself.

She reached the intersection of Rose and Vine. Even though it was 4 am, it was not dark. Sequoia, after all, was located within the Arctic circle and it was still August. Even after five years, she was still getting used to these extreme conditions: seeing the sun all twenty-four hours during the peak summer months versus not seeing it at all for weeks on end in the middle of winter. But not getting used to something didn't mean that she didn't like it. On the contrary, she loved it all. The fact that she - a young woman - could walk outdoors on her own in the middle of the night was incomprehensible to most women who were not lucky enough to live in Sequoia.

Most Sequoians made full use of the summer months. So much so that perennial fatigue due to lack of sleep reached epidemic proportions during the mid-summer weeks. Alia - a stickler for punctuality - had to learn to be patient with her colleagues during summer as they more often than not showed up late at work. She felt that humans behaved exactly like plants in these higher latitudes. They tried to soak up as much of the sunlight as possible whenever they got a chance.

Ironically, most of Sequoia's residents had come from tropical regions where sunlight was generally considered a hazard to life. There was just too much of it and it tended to produce unbearable heat. By default, tropical people preferred being in shade to being out in the sun. To them, heat had morphed into a deadly threat in recent years. They used to find it incomprehensible that white-skinned folks from Europe and America craved the sun. So much so that they would spend a fortune to travel thousands of miles away from their homes during winter to places where they could take off all their clothes and simply lie in the sunshine for hours doing absolutely nothing. After being transplanted to the Arctic Circle, however, practically every Sequoian had become a worshipper of sun and heat. All that muscle memory about the sun and heat being bad had gone out the window after experiencing the first cold dark winter that seemed to last for an eternity.

One adapts. One evolves. That was what life was all about. Pretty much from the beginning of time.

Alia heard her colleagues long before she saw them and could tell that Sonia was very agitated. She rounded the corner, crossed the street, and walked into a small park with a bubbling stream passing through the middle of it. Sonia was gesticulating at someone.

Unlike the first murder where the victim's head had been brutally cleaved with a shovel, this one showed no sign of any violence at all. Not a leaf seemed to be out of place. Except, of course, for the body of a man peacefully hanging from the branch of a

Rowan tree. Alia thought that while there was no sign of blood, there definitely was a lot of red color from the distinctive red fruits of the Rowan tree. She walked around the body trying to take in as much as she could. Sonia noticed her and beckoned.

“Not a single death, even by natural causes, for the first five years. And now suddenly two murders in one month!” Sonia voiced the thought that was soon going to be at the top of everyone’s mind.

In a large city packed with migrants from all over the world, the latter was not the strange part. The former was. Such an extended period of peace was practically unheard of in human history. But people got used to a pattern and they started thinking that that was how it had been all along. “Shifting baselines” was the name of this cognitive phenomenon. Alia had read about it during training. She had also been taught about other cognitive biases that most people routinely exhibit. Actually, there were quite a few of those and she always felt that she should permanently keep a cheat-sheet handy. It would be useful when talking with not just suspects and witnesses but also colleagues. And friends, too. Basically, everyone in the world.

Sonia, meanwhile, continued with her commentary, “...and two Muslim men at that. I mean - what are the fucking odds of that happening?

Women outnumber men by two to one in Sequoia. At least on paper, that is. Who the hell knows what everyone considers their gender to be anyway. And Muslims are less than a quarter of the population.”

Alia raised an eyebrow at these statistics. The odds were indeed quite small. But then she thought, two data points were just that - two data points. They did not indicate a pattern. This could still be just a coincidence. She grabbed a tablet from one of the uniforms and started scanning the information about the victim. All his basic information had already been downloaded from the chip implanted in him.

The first murder had been deemed to be a crime of passion while this one seemed to have been methodically executed. Outwardly, the two victims looked nothing alike. The man murdered three weeks ago was a fair-skinned bearded former Syrian while the one hanging in front of her was a dark brown clean-shaven Sudanese. Qasim, the Syrian, had been 30 years old while Nadeem, the Sudanese, was 27 years old. The age was not really a helpful parameter, thought Alia. At that moment, everyone in Sequoia was between the ages of 23 and 40.

“Do we suddenly have a serial killer to deal with?” continued Sonia with a strained laugh. She was known to attempt poorly-worded humor. Hardly anyone bothered to react to it.

"The city council had been getting impatient about the unsolved first murder. With this second one, I don't know what I am going to tell them."

"Well," Alia thought, "don't tell them that!"

Even though she seemed outwardly calm, Alia's heart was hammering away. She didn't know why she was feeling this anxious. She was not unaccustomed to death. Rather, she had seen too much of it in Iran. Way too many people died in her village due to natural causes and not-so-natural causes. Diseases were common and unfortunately, so were arbitrary executions by the various militia. Her own father and elder brother had been summarily shot dead when she was a teenager. According to her mother, she used to get nightmares for months after. Later, she had done what most people did when faced with a never-ending procession of traumas, she became numb to the pain. Then she stopped trying to make sense of it. And at some point later in time, she simply tuned it out.

The crime scene investigation team arrived with their kit and started collecting whatever evidence they could from the body and the immediate surroundings. The medical examiner, Leela, had done a quick in-situ medical examination and was supervising the lowering of the body to the ground. Helping the cops was a part-time job for Leela. Her main occupation was that of a professor at one of the teaching hospitals. However, as luck would have it, she had been trained in conducting post-mortem examinations before she had moved to Sequoia. She was one of the few folks in the police department that had extensive hands-on experience in the job that she was doing. That particular skill of hers had not been called upon in Sequoia until last month.

She walked over to where Sonia and Alia were standing and said, "at first glance, the cause of death seems to be straightforward - strangulation and the resultant asphyxia.

We haven't found any evidence as such. There are no finger-prints. No tears in the clothes. No signs of struggle anywhere around. Looks like the victim did not put up any fight.

The rope used is available in most hardware stores in the city. We shall try to see if we can get any traces from it.

We picked up some foot-prints in the vicinity but they may not have anything to do with the murder. This park is quite popular, especially, in summer."

Sonia made a face. There was not much evidence found for the first murder either. Although, in that case, the evidence had been washed away by heavy rain. No crowds

because that crime had been committed outside the city in a research camp. They had not even found the body for three days.

“We shall interview the neighborhood as soon as folks are up and about. Hopefully, we shall get some leads on his movements from last evening,” said Alia.

Leela was looking carefully at Alia’s expressions. She could tell that Alia was tense, but couldn’t figure out why. She had been one of Alia’s instructors and had gotten to know her fairly well over the years. She had found Alia to be a preternaturally calm person. But since the first murder, she had sensed that something was amiss with Alia. Initially, she had put it down to nerves as Alia was asked to lead her first-ever murder investigation. But now that she thought more about it, it didn’t seem to be nervousness. Maybe something else. She just couldn’t put her finger on it.

She patted Alia on the shoulder and added, “we shall figure it all out soon enough. Try not to get too bogged down. Sometimes these investigations take more time than usual. But the perp always makes mistakes. And that leads to their arrest. We shall get them. Don’t worry.

And remember what I said after the first murder. The killer is still here in Sequoia. That chip they injected in all of us when we came here ensures that if we put even one toe outside the designated boundary, it automatically gets flagged.”

Instead of seeing relief, Leela was puzzled to see the tension deepen somewhat before Alia managed to wrestle her face back to a neutral expression.

“Yes, of course, we shall get them,” Alia murmured. She nodded at both women and left. Sonia had told her that her team had assembled at the police HQ.

Leela and Sonia continued to talk after Alia left. They were about the same age and among the older residents of Sequoia. They were both Bengali but from different countries. Leela was from West Bengal, a state in India, while Sonia was from Bangladesh. Since it was just the two of them, for a change, they could freely talk in Bengali, their mother-tongue. It was nice to air their thoughts that way.

Leela glanced at the rapidly vanishing figure of Alia and asked Sonia, “she seems to be taking this hard. You sure that she has it in her to lead not just one but two murder investigations simultaneously?”

Sonia was thoughtful for a few moments and then she quietly said, “she is our best chance at cracking these cases.”



“Hmm... okay. By the way, you mentioned the city council’s impatience. How about the UN administrators in New York? What are they saying?”

“Nothing so far. They seem to be taking it in their stride.”

“Well... let’s hope that we solve these cases satisfactorily.”

“Yeah... cheers to that. I think, I should ask Alia to focus mostly on Nadeem and put Qasim on the back-burner for a bit. I feel that that we are more likely to make progress on this one than Qasim’s. We may never solve the first one.

Just a feeling.

Anyway... gotta go.

And please make the post-mortem of Nadeem your top priority.”

“Of course!”

## Chapter Two

Alia decided to walk to the HQ. She needed some time to calm down and organize her thoughts before she faced her team. She was not sure why she was feeling so unsettled ever since that first murder. She was just not used to feeling this way. She paused to take several deep breaths and then started walking briskly. Tall and lithe, she reached the HQ within half an hour.

The team was fidgeting as she walked into the incident room. They had, of course, received the preliminary details. Some of them had been to the crime scene for a quick look-around before assembling at the HQ.

In the first week immediately after the first murder, the team had worked round-the-clock as they applied everything they had learned to find the killer. However, that energy started wearing off after the second week as none of the leads yielded anything useful. Almost a month later, the team appeared to be simply going through the motions.

Alia had the difficult task of re-invigorating the young team and fervently hoped that they could solve, at least, this one quickly. She stood at the podium deep in thought when she realized that everyone was patiently looking at her. She looked up and nodded at them.

“Alright, let’s start putting together the dossier on Nadeem. Address, friends, work place, social media...”

Tozi, you take the lead in compiling the dossier. The rest, send your notes and data to her as you collect it.

Carlos, find out where Nadeem worked. You and I shall go interview his colleagues right after this.

Santosh, take the forensic team to Nadeem’s home. Don’t interview the neighbors right now. You and I shall go there later in the evening.

Nadia, start tracing Nadeem’s movements from yesterday. Take the uniforms for a thorough door-to-door questioning around the crime-scene. Start with a couple of blocks radius and expand if you strike out. Make sure the uniforms get all the relevant details down. Many are still in-training. Maybe do a quick refresher on questioning before heading out.”

Everyone nodded and got busy with their assigned tasks.

“Oh... and Tozi, I need you to pull Nadeem’s pre-Sequoia details. Whatever you can find.”

This last item had not been considered in Qasim’s case. Seeing Tozi’s puzzled expression, Alia shrugged and said, “well, let’s think a bit differently this time around.”

For most Sequoians, their lives before arriving in Sequoia were not much worth remembering. It was not that people were not in touch with their families and friends back home. To be sure, “back home” was not really the way most thought about the places where they came from. Sequoia was their home and it would be so until they died unless they decided to leave it for good. Staying in touch with folks from their former homes meant having some sort of a virtual conversation and that was pretty much it. Those were the terms they had all agreed to in exchange for living in Sequoia. Most were focused on making something good with the rest of their lives. Not much emotional bandwidth was left to indulge in nostalgia.

The more important reason behind Tozi’s puzzled expression was that none of the Sequoia residents had any family living in Sequoia. In fact, the residents had been, specifically, selected in such a way that no one was supposed to even know anyone else from their pre-Sequoia days. Then, Tozi wondered, why would the past life matter in the investigation?

“Should I also try to pull up similar information for Qasim?” asked Tozi.

“No. This is a long shot. Let’s see if something useful pops up for Nadeem before we spend more time on Qasim’s case.”

Tozi studied Nadeem’s official data to identify key search parameters. He was from the town of Nyala in South Sudan, one of the deadliest regions in the world. The relentless droughts and unending civil wars had left tens of millions of people homeless. Most gravitated toward refugee camps set up by international aid organizations or the UN. The rest wandered around the land searching for safe refuge from marauding gangs.

As far as she could tell, no one else from Nyala had come to Sequoia. A few came from that country, but they were from other villages and refugee camps. She ran a quick query to see if there were any linkages between him and anyone else in Sequoia. Nothing popped up. Another dead end.

She scrolled through his meager social media presence. Most of the pictures were from when he was in his teens. There were no pictures of him since he came to

Sequoia. This was not surprising as quite a few folks found that their real-world social life was way more interesting than whatever they could find online. In any case, the online world had taken a turn for the worse ever since generative artificial intelligence had arrived on the scene several years ago. The difference between real and fake was no longer apparent to anyone. Most people now used online tools only for direct communications with people they knew in real life. The notion of interacting with a stranger online had more or less become obsolete.

She zoomed in on one of his photos. She stared at it for a few moments, trying to articulate her reaction to it. She felt that his eyes betrayed fear. Another thing that struck her was the way he seemed to be turning away from the camera while simultaneously pulling his turban's flap across his face. "Evasive" was the word that sprang to her mind. Why didn't he want his picture taken? Who was he hiding from? Who was he afraid of?

He was probably 18 or 19 when the picture was taken. He had a wispy beard and a faint mustache to go with shoulder-length hair. She hadn't visited the crime scene. So she pulled up some of the crime scene photos to compare with. And they showed him to be completely clean-shaven with short stylish hair.

Unbidden, she remembered her older brother Juan as she stared at Nadeem. Juan was frail and got bullied by other kids in their village in Mexico all the time. That particular look in Nadeem's old photo was the same as Juan had when he was trying to escape his bullies.

Unlike Juan, though, Nadeem was not frail at all. Rather, he seemed to be a stout guy for someone from South Sudan. She had seen the news footage from that region. Most of the people were emaciated and their eyes had that far away look, as if their spirit had already left the earth while their body merely survived in that godforsaken place. Something was not adding up. Even Nadeem's clothes in that old photo were quite decent. No obvious tears or rips. They even seemed clean. Then why that hunted look?

There was only one video of Nadeem. He looked somewhat younger in it as compared with the photo. No sign of any facial hair at all. He was playing the flute under a tree in the middle of a what looked like a blistering hot day. There seemed to be some sheep behind him but she couldn't tell whether there was any audience in front of him.

The tune he was playing was incredibly fast. It felt like he couldn't wait to get out all the notes. She closed her eyes and heard the tune. The image that sprang up in her mind was of a herd of wild horses galloping across a pasture with unbridled passion. Each one lost in its own world and yet somehow their hooves synchronized in a harmony that only they were aware of. It had a rhythm and there were quite a few high notes close to the end as if those galloping horses were about to reach their destination and leap high

into the air. She had no idea what kind of music it was. She could tell, though, that this guy knew how to carry a difficult tune. More importantly, in the video, his eyes had none of that hunted look from the photo she had seen earlier. Instead, his eyes glinted with such intensity that she felt a bit intimidated. After he finished the tune, though, his face transformed back into that same hunted look.

## Chapter Three

Alia went to her desk and started dictating the preliminary case notes. But her mind kept wandering all over the place. Then Maria called and she reluctantly decided to answer it.

“Yeah...” said Alia noncommittally.

“Looks like our own Phryne has not just one but two murder mysteries to solve now!” Maria chuckled.

For someone who created shows for a living, Maria simply couldn’t be bothered to read the room. But then that’s how Maria was, a bundle of emotions that was always leaking this way and that. Most folks who met Maria for the first time, struggled to understand her constant mood shifts and usually ended up being annoyed with her. Alia had, instead, immediately fallen in love with that kaleidoscope.

At the moment, though, Alia was simply not up for Maria’s effervescence. She was about to make an excuse and hang up when Maria blurted out, “our show, today, had to be postponed because Nadeem was our only flautist and that instrument is one of the crucial elements of the soundtrack.”

“What the... how the hell do you know Nadeem is the one who died?” Alia was flabbergasted.

“It is all over social media. Some passerby must have recognized him while you guys were doing whatever it is that you do. I even saw a photo of his body in some clip. It is him alright.”

Alia made a face.

“So this guy was a musician?” Alia was waving Carlos over to her desk as she put Maria on the speaker-phone.

“Yes and no. He plays the flute. Quite well, I must say. But he works at the concert hall as one of the sound technicians. We had been rehearsing at the hall over the last couple of weeks and he used to hang out with my musicians all the time. When he heard that our regular flautist was sick, he auditioned. And I thought he was a good fit.”

“How well did you know him?”

“Hardly. I didn’t speak to him much. The music director worked with him. I probably told him something or the other about the music piece while we were rehearsing.”

“Thanks! I will call you later,” Alia hung up and turned to Carlos. She was about to tell him to call the concert hall when he interrupted, “I had found his place of work and I had already set up an appointment to meet with the assistant manager in about an hour.”

“Great! Let me finish my notes and we can go. We can grab some breakfast on the way. I am famished.”

Alia and Carlos got on the tram. It was not particularly crowded that early in the day. The news flashing on the TV had not yet mentioned the second murder. Sonia would issue a press release later in the day.

Both of them made a beeline for the breakfast counter in the tram. They bought Turkish coffee and a couple of flaky pastries. Then drifted apart as they dug into their pastries. Both of them had things on their mind.

Carlos was busy formulating the questions that he wanted to ask Nadeem’s colleagues. Alia was trying to figure out where her discomfort was coming from and also what that recurring dream meant. The ache in her head had merely receded in the background with all that was going on. She automatically touched her head to see if there was any swelling. And sure enough, there was some. Luckily, it was hidden by the bandana she was still wearing.

It was another lovely summer morning. The streets were starting to fill up with folks strolling to work. Some were lazily riding their bikes or coasting on their skateboards. Cars were not allowed in Sequoia which had been a total bummer for people like Nadia, Alia’s colleague. Nadia had grown up in a nomadic tribe in Tunisia where her male relatives routinely raced horses and camels. If they had diesel to spare, they would race the jeeps and pickup trucks .

Of course, Nadia was never allowed to race anything at all. But that didn’t stop her from dreaming about it all the time. She had been absolutely fascinated with car-racing ever since she had seen the Fast-and-Furious movies. One of the reasons why she had applied for Sequoian citizenship was because the city was in Norway where women were allowed to drive cars. She was crestfallen when she arrived and saw that cars simply didn’t exist in the city.

The few professions that offered at least some use for a car-like vehicle included police and freight transport. Driving a freight van seemed way too boring for someone like her. She was a quintessential extrovert. So, police it was. Not that she got to drive around in a car with the flashing lights and the blaring siren. But there were at least some occasions when she was asked to drive an all-terrain vehicle outside the city. It always cracked up Alia whenever Nadia would try to create elaborate schemes to venture out of the city on official business. That trick rarely worked on Sonia. But Nadia never gave up trying.

Alia's thoughts were just not coalescing that morning. She gave up trying to figure out her situation and let her gaze wander outside. This was a familiar route. It had some of the best murals in the city. A few days ago, Maria had dragged her there to check out a new one. They had gone late at night because it was supposed to be viewed in the dark. As the tram winded its way down the street, Alia moved closer to the window to see how the mural looked during daytime. She was stunned to see that it had been painted over already.

The one she had seen was that of an ethereal waterfall with exotic trees and animals arranged all around it. She had been entranced by it for a long time. And had assumed that because of its popularity, no one was likely to paint over that mural any time soon. But lo and behold, she was now looking at a gorgeous portrait of a young woman with ravishing hair cascading along the left side of the face. Subtle tattoos and jewelry covered the face and exposed neck.

She stared at the beguiling face. She was about to comment to Carlos about how quickly that waterfall mural had been painted over when it suddenly hit her. It hadn't been painted over at all. It was the same mural. Because of the magic of using paints with distinct chemical properties, the artists were able to juxtapose two entirely different paintings.

The shimmering waterfall at night was the same as the cascading hair of the girl during the day. Unbelievable! Alia had an excellent memory and she could immediately spot all the things from the night-time painting that were transformed in light. She couldn't help clapping at this astonishing feat.

Then the tram entered the next block and reality crashed into her brief sojourn of art appreciation. She winced. Just like that day-night painting, maybe there was another way to look at her thoughts where they would make perfect sense.

She was experiencing really strange emotions. Sometimes they were laced with some sort of anxiety. Sure, she was responsible for solving these cases. But it was a job. Nothing more, nothing less. It was not as if someone was going to fire her if she failed. At other times, she felt fearful. This was absurd. Why would she be afraid? Of what?



There was anger, too. That could be partially explained by the fact that she held herself to a pretty high standard and the failure to solve the first murder was gnawing at her pride. She was a damn good detective and yet, she had gotten nowhere in solving the first murder.

The new feeling of dread was, probably, because of the second murder and the off-hand comment by Sonia about serial killers. That was the last thing she wanted. Serial killer stories are nice for TV shows and movies. In the real world, they can mess up entire communities for years, sometimes decades. She had read lots of case-histories as part of her training.

Her early assessment of the stark differences between the two murders strongly suggested that the perpetrators were different. Unless this was some really weird psychopath who went out of their way to change their methods for each kill. It hadn't happened before but that was no guarantee that it would never happen. The second murder just felt really different than the first one. She was almost hundred percent sure that they were completely unconnected.

## Chapter Four

It took Alia and Carlos another five minutes to reach the tram stop closest to the concert hall. They hopped off and rapidly walked to the side entrance where someone seemed to be waiting for them.

"Hi! You must be the police.

My name is Vidya. I am one of the assistant managers here."

Vidya was a well-rounded woman with almond-shaped black eyes. She had accentuated them with some kohl. She was wearing what felt like a stylish boiler-suit and seemed surprisingly fresh given the early hour.

"Good morning, Vidya," Alia greeted her.

"I am Alia, the lead investigator. And this is my colleague, Carlos.

Thanks for meeting us at such short notice."

"No worries. I was already here when you called," Vidya said while shaking Carlos' hand.

"We have a complicated concert scheduled for today and I wanted to get an early start."

Alia nodded at Carlos. Earlier, she had told him to lead the interview. Carlos had the potential to be a good detective because of his unusually meticulous approach. But he also got tongue-tied when it came to interviewing people. Sonia and Alia had decided to nudge him out of his comfort zone.

"So... umm... Vidya... umm... we-shall-try-to-wrap-this-interview-up-quickly."

"Excuse me!?" Vidya looked at Alia to see if she had understood what Carlos was trying to say.

Carlos's face was crimson with embarrassment.

Alia debated whether to take it from there but decided to give Carlos another chance.

“Patience, Padawan,” she could almost hear the voice of Sonia in her head.

In a quieter and steadier voice, Carlos started again, “sorry about that.”

Vidya simply nodded.

“Do you know Nadeem?” Carlos asked right off the bat. Alia couldn't help herself and frowned at him. Did he really want to just dive in without any preamble? As she turned back to observe Vidya's reaction, she caught a fleeting half-smile being replaced immediately by a neutral expression. "Interesting," Alia thought.

“Why? Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes. Quite well, actually.”

All the color had drained from Carlos' face as he realized that he had asked about Nadeem in the present tense. Based on Vidya's reaction, it was clear that she didn't know Nadeem was dead.

He froze and then in a flat low voice said, “umm... we are very sorry to inform you that Nadeem was found dead earlier today.”

The reaction on Vidya's face was instant and devastating. Gone was any semblance of poise. Her face turned ashen. She crumpled right in front of them as if someone had let out the air from a balloon. If not for Carlos' quick action to catch her, she would have hit the ground hard.

Alia knelt down to cradle her head. She pulled out her water bottle and sprinkled some of the water on Vidya's face. A few moments went by. Carlos anxiously looked at Alia wondering if he should call for an ambulance.

Slowly, Vidya stirred. She opened her eyes and started crying softly.

Alia let her cry for a bit. She gently stroked her back as Vidya sat up on the floor. After a few moments, she softly asked, “were you two close?”

Vidya nodded and even more tears streamed down her cheeks. Those beautiful black eyes looked like muddy ponds and some of the kohl started spreading under her eyes.

"Why don't we go to your office and sit down for a bit?"

"Yes... yes... of course."

Vidya stood up with their support and led them inside. Her shoulders sagged under the weight of the immense grief. Alia continued to lightly hold on to her arm as they walked. The building was quiet as a tomb except for Vidya's deep breaths.

In contrast to Nadeem, Qasim had been a loner and Alia's team had never really gotten to know much about him from anyone around him - not his neighbors, not his colleagues, not even the cafe that he frequented for his meals. He was doing research and only seemed to interact with his research cohort if at all. Even those conversations were limited to academic discussions. No one seemed to know Qasim, the person.

They patiently waited for Vidya to calm down. The office was functional. There were no items of personal interest. It was probably used by many people as and when needed instead of being permanently assigned to any one person in particular. It had all the hallmarks of being a space that was re-configured frequently. The table was askew and the chairs were pushed into the corners. There were different kinds of paraphernalia lying on the desk and scattered around the shelves resting against the wall behind the desk. Alia figured that the forensic team was unlikely to find anything of value in there.

Finally, Vidya started talking.

"I said that Nadeem and I were close. That is not really true.

I liked him... I mean... a lot."

A bit of color rose in her cheeks.

"But I am not sure how he felt about me," she murmured.

"We had been working together for a while. He was the quietest one in our team. He basically did what he was told. He would speak up only if he strongly disagreed. Which happened rarely.

The only other time he opened his mouth was when he played his flute. That usually happened during his breaks when he would sit in one corner of the stage and play his haunting tunes."

Carlos asked, “did you two ever go out? I mean, for lunch or something?”

“Well... I did invite him out a few times. He always declined.

I tried to chat with him one-on-one during our breaks. But now that I think about it, he rarely said much in those conversations. He seemed to prefer listening to me chatter away.

I used to tell myself that he listened because he must like me, too. Else why would he hang out with me?” Vidya looked at them defiantly.

“Was there anyone that had any problems with him? Any arguments? Any fights?”

“In two years, he must have lost his temper, maybe, once or twice. I think, the first time was right after he had come aboard and we had all gone out for drinks. Everyone was a bit too tipsy than usual. And someone - now I can't remember who - was asking Nadeem where he came from. Nadeem suddenly got livid. He even smashed his wine glass.”

Carlos pointedly looked at Alia.

“And the second time?”

“I am afraid this was with me. I had told him to change some settings in our audio equipment. It had been a long day... heck a long week!

We had been preparing for this really complicated show. There were numerous disagreements with the performers and everybody was on the edge. At one point, I simply gave up trying to convince the performers on what the correct settings were. I told Nadeem what to do. And he reiterated why that was the wrong thing to do.

Maybe, I was a bit short with him. I told him to just do it and move on to the next task. He didn't say anything but the expression on his face really scared me. His anger just wafted off him like a winter gale. I made an excuse and ran out of the room. For the next few days, he avoided even making eye contact with me.”

“When did this happen?”

“Maybe a few weeks ago. Dunno... I think it was before the previous show.”

“Anything outside of these two incidents? Say, from his past?”

“In all the time that he has worked here, he has never mentioned anything from his past. And, especially, after that outburst at the bar, no one asked him about it again.

Anyway, the past is the past. What’s the point of talking about it? Even I get annoyed if someone goes on and on about their past.”

“Before working with you, what did he do?”

“He was an electrician. And he had also been certified as an A/V technician.

Actually, I was on his interview panel. Not only was he good at the technical aspects, because he was a decent musician, he had an excellent ear for sound.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Yesterday, during the last rehearsal of the show. After wrap up, I didn’t see him leave. I was quite preoccupied with the show’s creator.

Between you and me, that one is a lot to handle. She keeps changing her mind so many times.

But I gotta say, the show is gonna be phenomenal. I can’t wait to see it as an audience member.”

Alia smiled but didn’t say anything. The creator Vidya was referring to was her partner, Maria, of course.

Carlos had done a good job of interviewing. He got more and more comfortable as the interview went along. Vidya had also stopped crying and was quite composed by that time. Alia felt that this was the most they could get out of her for the time being. She looked at Carlos and nodded.

He thanked Vidya and mentioned that they would like to interview the rest of her colleagues as soon as possible. She promised to arrange that. She also offered to get a list of performers that Nadeem had come in contact with in the last few days.

As they were walking out of the office, Carlos glanced back and noticed that tears had again started streaming down Vidya’s cheeks. She had somehow found the strength to

pull herself together for the duration of the interview. The moment it was over, she succumbed to her grief all over again. He wished that he could go back and comfort her. But he was a cop and she could be a suspect.

By that time, a few staffers of the concert hall had trickled in because they had gotten conflicting messages about whether the concert was happening or not. Some had heard about Nadeem's death but, again, were not sure if that was true. They were nervously talking in a huddle when Alia and Carlos stepped out of the office. Alia decided to interview them right away. It took almost three hours to finish all the interviews. Other staffers kept trickling in as the morning wore on. Once they were done with the interviews, they decided to stop by the crime scene before taking the tram back to the HQ.

While Carlos walked around the crime scene, Alia checked in with the two uniforms who were keeping guard. A couple of crime scene technicians were still collecting evidence. There had been nothing out of the ordinary, according to the uniforms. A few people had tried to chat up the uniforms. But that was about it.

Just as Alia turned away from the uniforms to summon Carlos, she noticed a tall black woman staring at the crime scene from across the street. There was nothing suspicious about her. Another gawker, no doubt, thought Alia. But even at that distance, there was something about the expression on the face of the woman that stuck Alia as odd. Before she could process that feeling, Carlos came over and told her that the rest of the team was ready for the debriefing at the HQ. She nodded and turned around for another look at the woman. But the woman had vanished.

On the tram ride back to the HQ, Carlos couldn't help himself and promptly asked Alia, "boss, how did I do?"

"You did well!" Alia smiled encouragingly at him. Then seeing that he was looking for some more feedback, she added, "it is best to ease into the conversation instead of getting to your main questions immediately. You have to show some compassion to the person you are talking with. It helps them trust you a bit. That way, you are likely to get good quality information from them.

Of course, sometimes using a provocative technique is necessary to throw them off their balance.

Which style to go with is something you have to learn to figure out."

Carlos was nodding his head as he jotted down these tips in his notebook. Alia was not a big fan of noting everything down. She preferred to assimilate new information while

she was getting it. That way it stuck in her head. "To each his own," she thought with a mental shrug.

The tram was crowded. The official press release about the second murder had been circulated and there were a lot of subdued conversations happening all around them. Understandably, everyone was in shock. The effect of the first murder had been fading as most people were beginning to write it off as an anomaly even though the killer had not been found.

Alia gazed around her and tried to infer the mood of the crowd from the expressions and the brief excerpts she could overhear. Was there fear? Anger? Apprehension?

It was close to lunch time and the tram's lunch counter was open for business. The delicious aroma from the oven lassoed them. Without exchanging even a look, they made their way through the crowd to the counter. She bought kebabs drizzled with lemon sauce while Carlos picked up some shrimp tamales.

This was not exactly the food they had grown up with because none of the food in Sequoia had meat in it. She knew that there was no animal being bred for food. There were no farms in the traditional sense. Everything was grown in these gigantic vertical farms enclosed in glass-houses. She had vaguely heard about the "meat" being manufactured in factories, whatever that meant. And she was quite sure that nothing much was imported from outside Sequoia because it was ridiculously costly.

It didn't really matter as she bit into the perfectly charred skin of the kebab and more or less inhaled instead of eating the tender "flesh" within. She was instantly transported to her happy place. No wonder she felt that these kebabs tasted exactly like the ones she used to eat in Iran. Or maybe not. She was not really sure about that any more. Initially, everyone wanted to replicate the exact taste from their pre-Sequoia homes. But as they all settled down, people became adventurous. And the chefs responded with panache. They not only fused the various cuisines in novel ways but also developed entirely new cuisines.

Alia found her and Carlos' choice of food entirely predictable. In moments of stress, people invariably revert to their comfort zones. Both of them had sub-consciously chosen their respective comfort food items. In fact, for the last few weeks, she had been craving Iranian food ever so often that Maria had gotten restless.

Maybe she should look up what Nadeem's last meal was. Or what he ate, generally. She turned to Carlos and asked him to jot down this line of questioning. He gave her a puzzled look but didn't say anything. He was generally open-minded and didn't mind going down rabbit-holes. In Alia's opinion, that was another important quality of a good



detective.

Until that first murder, the detectives worked mostly on burglary cases. Most of them were simple cases. The perpetrator was, often enough, one of the employees at the place where the theft had occurred. Usually, the perpetrator confessed to the crime within the first couple of interviews. Typically, the burglary was the culmination of a series of petty misdemeanors that had gone either unnoticed or unpunished.

The perpetrators were, more often than not, genuinely ashamed of their deed. It also became apparent that they had relied on thieving since their childhood, driven mostly by hunger. There was no malice behind most of the thefts. On the contrary, both the investigation team and the victims of the crimes were, in many cases, disarmed by the naiveté and innocence of the perpetrators. Most of the perpetrators were sentenced to community service of varying lengths depending on the value of the stolen things.

In a few cases, the thefts were quite creative. Some perpetrators seemed to not even want the thing that they had stolen. For them, the act of planning and executing the theft seemed to be the whole point of the act. They considered themselves to be artists.

The murders, though, were something else. There was no possibility of absence of malice. And there was nothing creative about them.

## Chapter Five

Sara was the tall black woman seen by Alia across the street near the crime scene. That location was not on Sara's usual way to college. In fact, it was quite a detour for her. But she had to see. Like pinching oneself to make sure one is awake. She needed to check if she had indeed annihilated Nadeem.

She was wearing dark blue bell-bottom pants and a matching loose-fitting V-neck top. The bottom edges of the pants, the sleeve-ends and the neckline of the top were beautifully embroidered in an identical pattern of bright yellow leaves and delicate white flowers. That morning when she woke up, she felt that she wanted to wear something that reminded her of home. Her grandmother had embroidered a similar design on the clothes that Sara used to wear when she was a toddler. When still had a home in Nubia. And a family. All she had were tattered clothes when she moved to Sequoia. But she had learned to sew and embroider. Then she had made this special set of clothes. They were her only reminder of her family and home that had been viciously snuffed out a long time ago.

Her hefty physique was not because of exercise. She had come to Sequoia severely under-nourished. The photo they had taken of her showed her skin stretched over her pointy cheekbones and chin. Over the course of the first year in Sequoia, the consistent and nutritious diet in a safe environment had transformed her from a wispy waif to a very solid and real person. Just like many of Sequoia's other residents.

By design, Sequoians were young. Specifically, below the age of 35 when they had arrived. All had come from places where they had faced severe adversity while growing up. That, in turn, had two kinds of somewhat offsetting impacts. On one hand, when they all came to Sequoia, the drastic improvement in quality of life in every which way imaginable led to most of them thriving like trees do in the short summers within the Arctic circle. No wonder, the once emaciated Sara was now working at a freight moving company - actually, lifting and moving around heavy loads as if she had grown up doing this kind of work.

On the other hand, many of them carried some kind of baggage, both physical and emotional, because of which their health was more likely than not permanently damaged in some way or the other. In Sara's case, the damage had been so bad that while dropping off a package, a few days ago, she had first seen Nadeem and become catatonic in mid-stride. Exactly, like a deer freezes when it senses the lion in its vicinity.

How could this have happened? What were the odds of a man from the same corner of the world as hers getting selected to move to Sequoia along with her? Far more

importantly, he was a monster! Everyone knew that! There was no way anyone could have knowingly selected him! How had he managed to slip into Sequoia?

To be accurate, she had heard him playing the flute before seeing him. The music had stopped while these thoughts ricocheted in her mind. Her heart had been racing wildly and she had fervently hoped that she wouldn't faint on the spot. She had quickly delivered the package and under the guise of looking for someone to sign the receipt, she had wandered through the auditorium. No one had paid attention to her as there had been quite a commotion happening on the stage. Some feisty woman had been standing on a chair attempting to organize something. Sara had carefully looked at each person on the stage and breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe it had all been in her mind. Maybe she had heard some other tune on the flute and had mistaken it for the one she feared. A tune she and thousands of people in southern Sudan had feared all those years ago. Maybe it had been the same tune but it hadn't been as obscure as she had imagined and someone else had been playing it. Was she never going to be allowed to forget what had happened?

She had been a ten year-old wisp of a girl when her world had collapsed all around her. She had been woken up by the sound of thundering hooves. The Janjaweed, a demonic band of pillagers, had finally found their way to her obscure village. For months they had all lived in fear that one day their luck would run out and they would fall victim to the Janjaweed. Many had left the village, correctly, assuming that it was only a matter of when not if their village and their lives would be destroyed.

She had been so scrawny that her grandmother had been able to quickly shove her into the leaves and branches that made up the roof of their hut. Barely had she done that when the front door had been smashed open by a couple of thugs. Her family had cowered in a corner too scared to run or scream. There had been absolute pandemonium in the village for a few minutes and then as if all sound had been sheared off by a blade, a foreboding silence reigned. Within a few moments that silence had been rent apart by the frenzied playing of a flute. They had heard about the vile flute-playing chieftain of one of the marauding gangs. This must be that gang. Whatever, flickering hope they had of finding mercy was swiftly extinguished by the notes cascading like a torrent from that flute.

The two intruders had playfully swung their swords while they had tossed her family's meager belongings. The moment the flute had begun, they had gotten started. First, they had casually beheaded her father and brother. As a rule, the men were always killed immediately before the real terror began. The force of the blood spatter had reached all the way up to the roof and some of the blood had gotten in Sara's eyes. She had gone numb and could barely see through the leaves and the mist of blood. Then they had yanked her mother and elder sister forward. They must have raped them repeatedly before killing them because she seemed to remember the screaming going

on for a long time before it became quiet enough to hear the eerie sound of the flute again. Her grandmother had fainted and those two monsters had simply forgotten all about her as they had hitched up their pants and left the hut to hunt for more victims.

She must have come around a few minutes later, even though it had felt like a lifetime had passed. She had managed to somehow extricate herself from the branches and had fallen down on the floor. She had felt her grandmother stir. Slipping and sliding in the blood all over the floor, she had crawled to where she could hear her grandmother whimpering in shock.

“Are you hurt, grandma?” she whispered.

“Uhuhh...,” came back the weak reply.

Her grandmother had slowly sat up and seen the carnage enacted on her family. There lay her daughter, her son-in-law, and two of her grandchildren cut to pieces. She had been amazed that Sara had somehow escaped the brutality and had crushed her to her bosom trying not to sob too loudly. Her freely flowing hot tears had mingled with the blood on Sara’s face.

Carefully, her grandmother had lifted the far corner of one of the wall coverings to peek outside. It had looked safe. That part of the village had been decimated and no one seemed to be around. She had pulled Sara through the opening as quietly as she could and had started crawling through the dark toward the shrubs.

Their strength had failed them as they reached the first dense shrub. They had crawled into the middle of the shrub and hoped that they would not be discovered. In a whoosh, they had heard rather than seen their neighbor’s hut go up in flames. And right there in the light of the burning huts, Sara had seen him. She didn’t know his name then. She wouldn’t know it for another 20 years. Until she went to a land far away from her home.

He had been calmly riding his horse while playing the flute. His crew had gone about gleefully torching the village while he had provided the horrific background score for their atrocities. His face had been utterly emotionless. A complete sociopath. She had been transfixed by the scene. Once all the huts were ablaze, he had stuck the flute in the pocket of his robe and had waved at the riders to get going. All of them had instantly obeyed his order. There could be no doubt in her mind that he was their leader. She had not seen any other face that night. Not of those two men who had actually tortured and killed her family. Not of the other raiders in the party. No one except him. No wonder that face had been imprinted on her very soul that night. Since that moment, for her, he had been the face of evil.

She didn't remember much of the next few days as she and her grandmother had wandered through the desolate wilderness in search of food and water. They had trudged at night as that had provided them with the most cover from the human predators roaming the land. Non-human predators had long ago abandoned this dried out part of the world. Finally, they had been found lying almost comatose in a dry stream-bed by a small team of UN personnel that had been surveying water resources in the region.

They had been taken to one of the many refugee camps administered by the UN. She had lived in the camp for the next 15 years. There she had learned to read and write. She had also picked up some math and science. She had helped wherever she could. And she had found her calling as a nurse in the makeshift medical clinic. She had never said no to any task that had been assigned to her. She had been unfailingly compassionate to all the people who came to the clinic. Food had always been scarce at the camp. She had routinely offered her meals to those who had needed it more than her.

Then one day, came the announcement for the selection of candidates for relocation to Sequoia. Out of the hundreds of women between the ages of 18 and 35 living at the camp, she had been selected to go. And her grandmother, her only family, hadn't hesitated even for a moment in telling her to leave. There was nothing to keep her in Sudan. Her grandmother had been in poor health and was not going to be around for much longer. The tears in the eyes of the two women had dried up long ago. When the day came, they had hugged each other and Sara had left Sudan with the faint hope that she could start a new life somewhere far away. Where she could finally be safe.

She had a difficult time adjusting to the weather in Sequoia. The first winter had been extremely distressing for many Sequoians. Several had even considered forfeiting their right to be in Sequoia and going back to their native land. A few had thought of committing suicide because to them going back was akin to death anyway. But no one had acted on it. After all, Sequoia was where they had finally found respite from seemingly perpetual trauma, not only the one imposed by nature but also by other humans. For the first time, they had adequate food, clothing, and housing. They had water! Lots of it. They could shower in it every day. They could drink as much as they wanted.

It might be unbelievably cold outside but indoors would always be warm. They were safe in their homes. No more marauding men who could attack them at will and leave them broken for life. For the first time, they had the opportunity to build their lives in exactly the way they wanted. Just as they had adapted to the heat and the sun, they would adapt to the cold and the dark. It was only a question of time. And time was on their side. They were all young. They had survived their terrible homes and of course, they would survive in this safe space. They had found peace, finally!

“Or had they?”, wondered Sara. Her past had followed her from Sudan to Sequoia. The evil had merely stayed dormant for the first five years in Sequoia. It had simply bided its time and then reappeared in her life, reminding her that she could never really escape her fate.

She had to do something, anything, to escape from this evil. She had plotted to kill Nadeem over the course of a week and then clinically executed her plan. Throughout that week, she had felt as if she were watching another person who looked just like her, go through each step of the execution. She had read somewhere about “out-of-body” experiences. This had to be that. The deed had finally been done last night. Justice had been delivered. The souls of her dead family could now rest in peace forever. Most importantly, she could finally be safe. Forever.

She was jolted out of her reverie because of a loud thunderclap that was accompanied by a squall of rain that drenched her in seconds. The consequences of her action blazed through her mind just as the sky was lit up by another round of lightning. How could she have acted so recklessly? What had she done?! She was bound to get caught. They would force her to leave Sequoia and her cherished life behind! They would send her back to Sudan where she would be punished. Maybe they would take pity on her and just hang her dead.

Panic gripped Sara and left her gasping for air. She was stunned by the enormity of the predicament that she had landed herself in. She had to lean on the wall behind her as she felt her knees buckling under her.

When she had come to Sequoia, she had promised herself that this was going to be a new beginning for her. She had been born again. She would leave all her past behind her for good. It was easier said than done and she had struggled through many nights filled with nightmares from her childhood. By the second year in Sequoia, those nightmares had started dwindling away both in intensity and frequency. The stellar work done by the indomitable therapists from all over the world volunteering their time had helped thousands of her fellow citizens in breaking away from their past. All that had come to nought. One brush against the past and all the efforts that she had put in over the years had disintegrated in a flash.

Or maybe not! She tried to systematically recall all the events of the last week. As far as she could tell, she hadn't left any clues behind that could lead the police to her.

The anonymity and ubiquity of moving vans had certainly come in handy when she had stalked Nadeem for days. She did not own the moving van. She borrowed it from the city government as and when she needed it. More importantly, the van had allowed her to hide the unconscious Nadeem for several hours last night before moving him to the park around midnight to hang him.

The panic gripping her somewhat subsided as the squall passed. She was drenched and had to go back home to change before she headed to the college. That is when she realized that the clothes she had been wearing yesterday may have picked up traces of Nadeem. They would yield his DNA that could tie her to his death. She had to get rid of those clothes right away and more importantly make sure that no traces were left in her flat. She carefully put those clothes in a dark cloth bag and using a strong disinfectant, carefully wiped down all the surfaces in her flat. Then she got rid of the clothes and the bag in the medical waste incinerator at her college.

## Chapter Six

Alia saw that Santosh was back from his trip to Nadeem's flat. Nadia and her uniforms were back, too. The rest of the team was also waiting for her in the incident room. She cleared her throat to attract everyone's attention.

"Can we do a quick update please?"

"Let's start with Santosh."

Santosh was from one of the forest-dwelling tribes of the state of Jharkhand in India. He was small guy with a dark brown complexion and a shock of oily black hair curling around the left side of his forehead. His large black eyes reflected his emotions instantly and completely. He was like an open book that even the least perceptive person could easily read. Unlike the others, he was also very quiet and rarely spoke until called upon to do so. Funnily enough, for someone of his stature, he had a deep baritone that surprised people all the time.

To a lay-person, it was not obvious what Santosh was good at, as a cop, that is. He - of course - could have made a fortune doing voiceover work with that splendid voice of his. He even had a knack of mimicking accents which had landed him in trouble growing up. For Alia, Santosh was, simply put, Mr. Reliable. He just got things done, without any fuss. He didn't need to ask many questions. He simply figured out what was expected of him and then invariably surpassed it.

"We reached Nadeem's flat at 8 am. The flat is located at... "

"Santosh, save those things for your formal report. Talk about what you found there," cut in Alia.

Santosh nodded and continued, "based on my observations, there didn't seem to be any sign of any other person - male or female - in his flat. The forensic team will tell us later if they found any trace of another person in his flat. No signs of a struggle.

The flat has the usual furnishings - bed, table, chair, etc. Most of his personal possessions seem to be music-related. There were a few posters of musicians stuck to the walls. He had very few clothes and majority of them seem to be of the mundane kind - jeans, t-shirts, etc. He did have one set of the traditional east African attire - white robe-kind of thing - and that religious cap Muslims wear. He also had a prayer mat that seemed to be in regular use."



“How did you figure that out?” asked Carlos curiously.

“There was no dust on the mat. It was carefully rolled up by the window that faced toward the southeast. Some of the other surfaces had dust on them.

There was no TV but there was a really nice audio system. There were very few books on the only shelf he has. A few of them were in Urdu, including, a well-used copy of the Koran. Most of the books were about music - theory, biographies, music-sheets, etc.

There was no other equipment. The forensic team is taking apart his phone,” continued Santosh as he settled into his narrative. His voice was quite soothing and Alia felt like nodding off. The lack of sleep from the previous night was starting to catch up with her.

“There is an art gallery attached to a small cafe that is open only during the evenings. We saw a couple of women in the common area. Both live in the same building and had known Nadeem by sight. But they had rarely interacted with him. Their impression was that he mostly kept to himself even when he was hanging out at the cafe. He always wore his headphones and seemed to be lost in the music. They could not remember seeing him in the last few days.

We shall - of course - go there again today evening to see if we can interview more of his neighbors. Any questions?” paused Santosh.

“Let’s hold the questions until we do the full round of updates,” interjected Alia.

“Tozi - you are up.”

Tozi was a plump woman with the narrow brown eyes and high cheek-bones characteristic of the Aztecs. Her complexion was a rugged honey wheat and she had a penchant for wearing some Aztec artifact every day in her waist-long dark brown hair. Sometimes it was not an object but Aztec make-up. She used to say that this was her way of staying connected to the spirit of her ancestors. Everyone else thought that it was an excuse to wear something colorful everyday.

She was actually quite good at make-up. In her spare time, she would offer to do make-up in the common area of the building in which she lived. Initially, she would do it for free as she could try out new ideas in addition to the traditional designs that her clients asked for. As her creations grew popular, she started charging a fairly hefty fee for her services and her appointment book was filled up for several weeks in advance. Recently, she had collaborated with Mythily who used to do make-up for the famously extravagant Kathakali dancers of Kerala before arriving in Sequoia. They had created a

whole new style that was catching on in the fashion world of Milan and Paris.

All those make-up activities were her hobby, though. Her day job was being a cop which she loved far more than anything else. She had been training to be a software professional in Mexico City before she was selected for relocation to Sequoia. Her focus had been database development, especially, for diverse kinds of data such as video, audio, text, numbers, etc. Even though it was a nascent field when she had selected it, it had appealed to her in a visceral way. She had observed that she was different from her family and friends, she experienced everything via all her senses. For example, her brother Juan listened to music in a way where he mainly experienced the sounds and remained ignorant about the words. Her dad was the opposite of Juan, he was all about words and rarely noticed the tune. Her mother preferred watching music performances instead of listening to them. But Tozi absorbed and enjoyed all aspects more or less equally. Sometimes, in fact, she would insist on attending the music performances in person so that she could also experience the crowd, the ambience, the smells, everything.

To the police department, it was obvious right away that she was best deployed to organize information instead of being out in the field trying to collect it. And she was an absolute genius at that. She had finished her studies in Sequoia while training to be a cop. She had been instrumental in setting up the information architecture for the Sequoia police department. Some of the European mentors of the Sequoia police department were secretly quite jealous of that database design.

Unsurprisingly, Tozi walked over to the windows and lowered the shades as her update would be a mix of audio-video material. Then she went over to her computer and projected her presentation on the barren beige wall behind her.

“I am going to focus on the information pulled together from various online sources.”

The screen showed various photos of Nadeem starting from the earliest ones - probably, from Sudan - all the way up to the post-mortem ones sent by Leela's squad. It was fascinating to see the progression from a seemingly troubled teenager to an increasingly assured young man.

“Nadeem didn't have a birth certificate on record. His only known address is from Nyala. That region has long been an unsettled place because of the drought going back several decades. Then there is the chronic menace of the militia, both freelance and government-backed. The refugee camps in that region run by the UN and other aid agencies did try to keep some records. But I have not found anything on Nadeem in those databases. Nomadic tribes are quite common in that part of the world - so it is quite possible that Nadeem was part of one of them and hence, never got included in any database.

Same as Qasim, Nadeem was also not socially active. He had boosted announcements about concerts on his social media page, probably, after he started his job at the concert hall. And then there were a few links to music that he had posted several months ago. He has a couple of dozen friends in his social network and they seem to be mostly colleagues from the concert hall and past performers that he had gotten to know. He follows a few musicians and bands but overall his level of activity is limited to once or twice a month.

I found some photos and videos of him that were posted by others. Some had tagged him while the majority were suggested by the facial recognition software. There was one video where he seemed to be sitting in a pasture playing the flute. It is hard to tell where it is shot - there was no meta-data with it. There appear to be a few folks in the audience and even some animals, all out of sight but their sounds were picked up by the microphone. I could recognize some neighing - so probably, horses and maybe some mules.”

Tozi clicked on the video and the room was immediately filled with the tune she had earlier listened to. She skipped through the video a few times to highlight the sounds of clapping and horses neighing close to the end of the video.

“He seemed to have been living well within his means and there had been no official complaints about him. His main expenses seem to be the usual - food, clothes, etc. Other than that, he spent money on music, especially, concerts. He had a few subscriptions to music services on-and-off. However, it looks like he mostly relied on the freely available audio-video material over the internet.

In terms of the places he frequented, he was consistent. The same grocery stores and cafes show up all the time. Most of the cafe receipts also indicate that the bill was for one person suggesting that he either ate alone or split the bill conscientiously if he went out with others. Nothing out of the ordinary. Not much to work with.”

Next, Alia directed Carlos to bring everyone up to speed on their conversation with Vidya. He had the habit of injecting his analysis into his observations in such a way that the audience had trouble keeping the two things separate. She interrupted frequently to ensure that he stuck with the observations and didn't spend too much time on his commentary. She valued his analysis, of course. But now was not the time to get into that. It was too early in the investigation. Analysis built on limited data could lead to biases that seeped into the very foundation of an investigation. Those biases, then, become hard to drain out at a later time. It was best to keep as open a mind as possible in the initial stages of an investigation. To simply observe and compile data.

Sonia had been quietly listening to the updates from the back of the room. She needed to make her own observations in order to brief the city council later that day.

She was confident of Alia's talent. Alia possessed all the necessary qualities one looks for in a lead investigator - intelligent, calm, good leadership skills, and most importantly, extremely perseverant. Alia had effortlessly resolved each and every theft case assigned to her.

She looked at each one of the team members in turn. She felt good about her selections and even proud of how far this cohort had come in such a short period of time. They were all good in their own unique ways. On top of that, they complemented each other well. Vitally, they were all in this for the right reasons. She had not detected even a single false note among them over the last five years. That was quite an achievement, given her naturally critical nature. Then why was this team struggling for the last month?

Her first instinct had been to lead the investigation. However, the city council persuaded her to delegate. They had correctly pointed out that she was leading the entire police department and there could be other crimes while the murder was being investigated. Her job was that of a manager. Being in the field was the last resort. There were at least a couple of guys in the team who had been part of murder investigations in their pre-Sequoia days. She - though - had not been particularly impressed by their skills. Therefore, she decided to go with her gut and picked Alia to lead the investigation.

Boy, had she regretted that decision when she saw the look on Alia's face while entering Qasim's campsite. Alia had been utterly stricken. She just stood there like a statue for a full minute. She didn't faint or anything like that. Just as she had been about to change her mind and send Alia back home, she noted with pride the superhuman effort made by Alia into pulling herself together. It had been touch-and-go, but Alia had taken one deep breath, shaken her head, squared her shoulders, and then nodded at her as if saying, "I got this!"

From that moment on, Alia was the very image of a typical experienced detective. Sonia had eased back from the investigation and was content with observing the team at work. They left no stone unturned. With absolutely nothing to show for the effort.

After that first briefing on Nadeem's case, she started getting a tad worried. The second murder was not violent - well, every murder is violent in its own way, but at least not as visibly gory as the first one. But there were unmistakable similarities as she had facetiously noted earlier in the day to Leela and Alia. The two victims were similar - quiet guys who seemed to keep to themselves and were, at least, privately devoutly religious.

Lots of people in Sequoia were devoutly religious and most of them kept that aspect of their lives private. There were a few places of worship scattered around the city. To the

best of her knowledge, those places never really got crowded. Her impression - unscientific and anecdotal - was that most people didn't really have much interest in religion beyond as one of the many ways to stay connected to their past. She, herself, had not given much thought to religion for a long time. She was born into a Muslim family and while she was a child, she had gone along with the rituals and customs that her family had made her participate in. She hardly remembered any of that.

As she was turning these things over in her mind, she became vaguely aware of Alia asking her something. "Sorry - what were you saying, Alia?"

"Boss - do you have any questions or comments for the team?"

"There is one question that comes to mind - did we dig into Qasim's past the same as we are doing for Nadeem's?"

"Not really. And even in the case of Nadeem, we are not sure if that is going to be a good use of our time. It was just an idea. Too early to say."

Carlos raised his hand. He could be a bit too formal at times which became tiresome after a while. Alia wearily nodded at him, "we are not in a classroom. You don't need to raise your hand every time you have to say something."

"Sorry. Do we know for sure that Nadeem's case is that of murder and not suicide?"

"Hmm... you are right. We don't. Tozi - please can you check with Leela about what they have found in their autopsy?"

Let's keep an open mind. If it turns out to be a suicide then we can go back to focusing on Qasim's case."

While she was outwardly talking about keeping an open mind, Alia's gut told her that it was a murder. She just couldn't put her finger on exactly why she felt that.

"It is already 4 pm. We have all had an early start. Let's call it a day.

God knows I am sleepy myself. We can pick this up tomorrow."

"But boss - I had planned on going back to Nadeem's flat to interview his neighbors in the evening," chimed in Santosh.

“Ohh... right! We need to do that. I’ll go with you. The rest of you can finish your reports and send them over to me and Tozi before you leave. Tozi, please could you take a crack at pulling together the full summary and send it to me. I will look at it later this evening. Santosh, let us leave around 5. I need to go take care of a few things.”

“Okay, boss!”

As Alia was walking to her office, Sonia fell in step with her and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “What does your gut tell you - murder or suicide?”

Alia stopped and turned around to look at Sonia. “Well... we have to wait to hear from Leela, don’t we?”

“I asked you, what does your gut tell you. Remember, a good investigator knows how to take into account both the evidence and her instincts as they chart the investigation pathway. So what do you feel?”

“I am inclined to think that it was a murder.”

“Okay - if it was a murder, then have you given any thought to the possibility of both the murders being connected in any way?”

“I don’t see any connection apart from the obvious similarities of both being lonely Muslim men.

But, there is no dearth of such people in Sequoia.”

“I think, your thought about digging into Nadeem’s past was a good idea. I suggest you do the same with Qasim. Maybe have Tozi allocate a little bit of her time to get that going while the rest of the team focuses on the interviews and other tasks.”

“Okay - I will talk with her tomorrow. I have to say though, it has been five years since all of us left our pasts behind. My working assumption had been that it has been long enough that the past is not relevant. Given our lack of progress on Qasim’s murder, I simply wanted to try something different with the second one.”

“Hmm... I think leaving a place is much easier than leaving the past behind.”

Alia didn’t say anything. But she knew exactly what Sonia was trying to get at.

## Chapter Seven

Nadeem's apartment was in northwestern corner of the city. Alia and Santosh got on a tram where the happy hour was underway. The regular clinking of glasses full of colorful cocktails interspersed with peals of laughter provided a pleasant background score for their journey. Unfortunately, neither Alia nor Santosh were in the mood of indulging. In any case, Sonia had a strict rule of not imbibing while on duty.

In the rush hour, it took them about twice as long as off-peak to reach Nadeem's apartment. Their tram had to stop frequently, people getting in and people getting out. The higher frequency of the trams meant that almost every intersection was busy. The pedestrians and cyclists made the congestion worse.

Nadeem's neighborhood was relatively quiet because there were a couple of commercial establishments located in it - a sports complex and a small garment factory. It was unusual to have two such establishments located in adjacent blocks as the city planners had aimed for not having dead zones anywhere in the city.

All apartment blocks in Sequoia were more or less identical. Each one consisted of a six-floor building excluding the ground floor which was completely allocated for commercial purposes. The building was square-shaped and built around a ground-floor courtyard. The entries to each flat opened in a common balcony that overlooked the courtyard. During winters, the courtyard would be covered with a weather-proof ceiling allowing the use of the courtyard year-round. Of course, during summer, the ceiling was left open.

Each flat was about 60 square meters with an open layout that included a large room and a bathroom. The room could be easily configured with prefab movable partitions to create smaller rooms that could serve as a bedroom, living room, and kitchen. Usually, when people decided to live together, they would try to find a couple of flats sharing a wall and merge them. Not that many people had chosen to pair up, though. Most preferred to live alone and hang out with others when they felt like it.

The similarities among the buildings ended at the level of basic structure, though. The way each building looked and smelt and sounded and felt was completely different as the tenants, both residential and commercial, had gone out of their way to make it unique. These were the new homes of a people that had decided to build a new life from scratch. And they had been eager to put their personal stamp on it.

Nadeem's building was an inviting place with most of the corridor walls covered with murals that the residents themselves had painted. The cafe/lounge in the courtyard doubled as an art gallery that appeared to specialize in water-color paintings, mostly

landscapes. But there were also a few exquisite sculptures depicting the flora of the tundra. When Alia and Santosh entered the building, the cafe was open and a few art enthusiasts were checking out the exhibit while in one corner a couple of tenants were catching up with each other in loud and carrying voices.

“Did you hear about Nadeem?”

“Who?”

“The guy who lived in flat #4D... I think?”

“What about him?”

“On the evening news, they said that his body was found in a park today morning.”

“What happened?”

“They didn’t say anything about that. They are urging folks to contact the police in case someone has any information about him.”

“Do you think it was a murder? That first murder from a month ago is still unsolved, isn’t it?”

“Dunno... maybe. Why else would the police be involved.”

“I think... I had seen him around. Did you know him? ”

“Not really. I think he was into music. I was in Maryam’s flat when I heard him playing the flute. She is in #4E. He was quite good.”

“How do you know it was him playing it? Could have been a recording. Or someone else...”

“He is a total loner. I doubt he had anyone visiting. And he was definitely practicing. Or maybe composing a new piece.”

Alia and Santosh had been surveying the building from the courtyard and had overheard this entire conversation which seemed to reinforce the observations from Santosh’s earlier visit here. How come the guy lived here for five years and his neighbors still knew so little about him? This case was becoming just as vexing as



Qasim's.

Alia walked over to talk with them.

"Hi!

My name is Alia and this is my colleague, Santosh. We are from the police department and we are investigating Nadeem's death.

We couldn't help overhearing your conversation. We would like to talk with you about Nadeem."

"Uhh... we don't know anything. I mean... we just knew that he lived here.

But we didn't really know him!"

Muscle memory is a powerful influence. People who came from places where the police were more often than not the bad guys, as a rule, tried to minimize their interaction with the police. There was nothing remotely oppressive about the Sequoia police department for the simple reason that it had been mostly invisible as there just hadn't been much crime in the city.

Alia sighed, in her mind. She had gotten used to this.

"You don't have to worry about anything. We are here to only ask questions."

"Ummm... okay."

This was the woman. She looked a bit on the older side - probably, the same age as Sonia. She had dyed her hair with henna into a vivid shade of red. Yet she was wearing quite sober clothes - grey formal pants and a plain white shirt. The guy seemed to be of a similar age and was wearing capris and a yellow kurta with thin blue stripes running down the length. He had a carefully groomed goatee and deep-set eyes.

"My name is Lisa and this is my neighbor Kiran."

"Thanks.

When did you last see Nadeem?"

Kiran straightened up.

“I don’t remember when I last saw him, specifically. I have seen him around.

I think he was doing something in music - professionally, that is.

In the first 2-3 years, I think he was studying and his fellow students visited him a few times. I vaguely remember them talking about harmonics and what not.

I hadn’t seen anyone visiting him in the last few days.

He sat in the courtyard, especially, on the weekends. But always wearing his headphones.

He may have chatted with folks. Dunno. Not a social guy.”

Lisa was nodding her head in vigorous agreement. “He was quiet as a mouse. Except - that is - when he was playing his flute.”

“Anything else?”

Both Lisa and Kiran shook their heads.

“Okay - thanks! Is it okay if we get your contact details so that we can reach out to you in case we have additional questions?”

“Uhh... we don’t want any trouble. I mean... really... we don’t know much anyway.”

That instinctive fear of police. Again.

“No trouble at all. We promise you. This is just in case.”

“Umm... fine. I guess.”

Alia nodded at Santosh and he stepped forward with his notepad and pen.

Alia wandered over to the cafe counter to chat with the barista.

"I know who you are! I have nothing to say to you people. You are useless!

Look what has started happening now. They have started targeting Muslim men. This is how it always is. We are targeted wherever we go. He did nothing to anyone. He went about his business. And yet, he was killed."

Alia was taken aback by this unprovoked outburst but outwardly she maintained her composure. While Sonia and she had discussed this similarity between the two victims briefly, it had not even come up within the team so far. How had this guy reached that conclusion so quickly?

"Sir - it is too early to suggest anything like that is happening. And even if that were the case, I assure you that we shall find the guilty party and hold them accountable."

"Did you know Nadeem?" Alia continued.

"Yes - I knew him. We chatted a few times. Usually, late at night when I was closing up the cafe and he was still here listening to his music."

"What did you talk about? I am sorry, before we continue, please can tell us your name? Are you a resident in this building?"

"What are you going to do with my name and my address? Target me next?"

This was getting a bit irritating.

"No, sir! All the information you provide is strictly confidential. We shall not be releasing it to the public."

"Yeah... we shall see!

My name is Shahid. Yes - I live here - Apt # 5H," he said pointing to his flat.

He had a well-tended beard and a crew cut. Alia could smell the jasmine oil that he used for his hair and beard. He was quite dark and about the same height as she was. But he looked strong. He was wearing a traditional muslim salwar-kameez that was beige in color. He continued to glower at Alia and Santosh.

"It was nothing. Just chit-chat.

Come to think of it - I did most of the talking. About customers and sales and all that.

Sometimes we prayed together.”

“Sir - why did you think anyone was targeting Muslim men? Had anybody said anything to Nadeem? Threatened him in any way?”

“Oh - as if you don’t know. They have always been targeting us.” He glanced briefly and pointedly at Santosh.

Santosh was wearing a red dot on his forehead, courtesy of Tozi’s enthusiasm. Tozi happened to be experimenting with different colors for one of her makeup projects. And Santosh was one of her regular guinea pigs who allowed her to use his face for testing new ideas. Santosh thought that he had cleaned his face before leaving the office that evening, but apparently some red makeup had not come off. It looked quite similar to a Hindu teeka.

“Who has been targeting you?”

“People like him,” again he stared at Santosh.

Alia decided to ignore this accusation and focus on the interview.

“When did this happen?”

“Ever since my childhood! All my life!!”

Shahid’s voice had risen. The rest of the people in the courtyard had stopped talking and were gawking at the three of them.

An altercation was a rare event in Sequoia. Initially, as everyone had been still using their native languages to communicate, frustration and all kinds of other emotions frequently spilled out. Voices did get raised a lot. Fists were shaken. Violence, though, had been avoided. One might have expected a fair bit of violence given that city consisted entirely of young people who had few social structures to constrain them for the first time in their lives.

“I am asking you about incidents here in Sequoia?”

“Ummm... no... well... they still don’t treat us well here either.” Shahid’s body language

was now distinctly defensive. Alia could tell that he was tense. He had, inadvertently, brought the spotlight on himself because of his shouting. He was looking around at the other people with blazing eyes.

Alia decided to change tack. She had to be careful in choosing her words to ensure that she was not disclosing any detail about the cause of death.

“Sir - right now we are here to talk about Nadeem. But, I am happy to take down any complaints that you have against anyone else while we are here.

In the morning, we visited his work place to talk with his colleagues. Now we are here to talk with his neighbors and friends. Did he have any friends that you know of?”

Shahid relaxed somewhat. The tension in the air was still palpable, though. There was no question about Alia’s ability to handle any violence that Shahid may have wanted to cause. She was excellent at unarmed combat. Santosh, though, had only achieved the minimum level of competence required by the police department. He would have stood no chance against the muscular Shahid on his own.

Moments before Alia had walked up to talk with him, Shahid had been scrolling through his social media feed where there had been numerous posts highlighting the fact that both victims were Muslim men. A muscle memory of another kind had kicked in - a paralyzing fear which could instantly transform into mindless violent action.

As a 3-year old kid growing up in a village in northern India, Shahid had been traumatized by the public lynching of his father. A crowd of fanatical young Hindu men had continued to pulverize Shahid’s father’s body long after he had ceased breathing. The entire crowd had been wearing those Hindu teekas on their foreheads and saffron clothing. Their chants had haunted Shahid’s nightmares for several years. He had survived because of a kindly youth in the crowd had gotten scared of the sudden violence that his friends were inflicting on a poor man. That youth had quietly backed away and stumbled over the prone body of Shahid who happened to be wearing the traditional muslim skull cap. He realized that Shahid would not escape the violence unless he was hidden. He had picked him up and quietly rushed away from the location before anyone noticed him.

Despite the five years of peace that Shahid had experienced at Sequoia, away from all the persistent terror of both natural disasters and human predators, that trauma had festered in his sub-conscious. He had clung on to his past through the addictive drip of social media. That connection had been sufficient to nourish his fears.

Of course, he had heard about Qasim’s murder. Over time, that news had receded from

his consciousness since he had not known Qasim. But the news of Nadeem's death had shaken him to the core. While he was barely trying to process that at a personal level, the social media python had already started coiling around him, whispering horrifying stories. The sight of Santosh with that red dot on his forehead was a sufficient trigger for that subliminal fear to burst forth.

Alia's innate calm reasserted itself in the situation as the tension slowly started ebbing. Shahid thought for a few moments about what Alia had said. Did Nadeem have any friends? He hadn't seen Nadeem hanging out with anyone at all. Maybe Nadeem would take off his headphones once in a while and briefly chat with someone in the cafe. But that was it.

Shahid shook his head.

"When did you last see him?"

"Not in a couple of days at least. I think, he had mentioned that he was busy with a show. He had been quite pleased that he was selected to play his flute in a show for the first time. We had celebrated that evening with the new pastry that I had introduced earlier this month."

"Okay. Thanks for talking with us. If you do remember something, we request you to get in touch with us as soon as possible. Here is our contact information."

Shahid gave her a tentative nod and took her card.

Alia turned to Santosh, "Let's call it a night. I am really tired. Tomorrow, we shall get the team to canvas the entire building in the evening. In the morning, Carlos and I will continue interviewing Nadeem's colleagues at the concert hall."

"Okay boss. I will write up my notes and send them to Tozi. Good night!"

## Chapter Eight

The next morning, Alia reached her office earlier than usual. She had gotten good rest, during the night. So she b up early and feeling fresh. She wanted to spend some time thinking about the case before she gave everyone their tasks for the day.

The previous night, she had quickly edited Tozi's daily report. Tozi was excellent at organizing information in a very short period of time. That was the understatement of the year, she thought. In fact, Tozi was a genius at connecting the dots. Then she had sent it on to Sonia.

It had been a long and exhausting day for her. Maria had made dinner, a stew of long-grained rice, lentils, squash, dried bay leaves, turmeric, and dried red chillies. Maria knew that this was one of her comfort food items. On the other hand, Maria had an unexpected day off because of the cancellation of the concert.

After dinner, she had fallen asleep with her head in Maria's lap. She dozed fitfully. The nightmare had showed up, almost like clockwork, the moment her eyes had closed. Yet again, she had the strange sensation that even though she was pursuing the suspect, she was unsure of actually wanting to catch the suspect. Or even know its identity. That was a really disorienting feeling. She had sat up suddenly. But then she just shook her head and then went off to sleep on their bed before Maria could react.

She had taken the tram to work. Usually, she walked during the summer months. She intentionally took a circuitous route that wound through as many parks as she could fit in without really going off on a tangent. She never tired of the greenery. But that morning she had felt like she needed to get to the office as soon as possible. The tram had passed by a mural of a gorgeous phoenix gliding in the sky that was painted across an entire block . In the last frame at the end of the block, the phoenix disappeared into mist. Another thing vanishing from her sight. It had reminded her of the recurring dream. It seemed like the artist who had painted the phoenix was rubbing her face in her inner turmoil. Not fair! She had frowned at the mural and looked away as the tram crept closer to her stop.

The last conversation of the previous day had unnerved her far more than she wanted to admit. Was it only Shahid who thought this way? She must get Tozi working on this right away, get a feel for what the public sentiment in Sequoia was like.

Leela had sent over the post-mortem report overnight. It was murder. They had found a heavy dose of over-the-counter sleep medication in his blood. Too bad that sleep medication was easily available from vending machines across the city.

The sleep medication, though, had not killed Nadeem. Death had indeed occurred due to strangulation. Time of death was between 12 midnight and 2 am. There were numerous traces found on his clothes that would need to be checked against all the people that he had come in contact with before his death. She needed more help for sure. Unlike Qasim, Nadeem had come in contact with a far larger number of people and her small team was simply not sufficient to tackle that.

Qasim's body was found at a research camp-site just outside the city, all alone in the wilderness. It was unambiguously murder. His head had been cracked open by a single blow of a shovel that was found next to him. The shovel had traces of his blood and hair on it. It had rained and they had found no fingerprints or other clues such as foot-prints around the body. Leela hadn't been able to narrow down the timing of his death. It could have been anywhere between a few hours to a few days because of the rain and the unseasonal chill that sometimes settled down at those latitudes.

During the investigation, they had found that Qasim seemed to have been one of those solo researchers who spent most of his time in the laboratory or the field. He did collaborate with researchers in other parts of the world - especially, those who funded his work - but those contacts had been purely transactional. Lots of communications related to work. But, none of his regular collaborators knew anything about his personal life. Nor did his neighbors. He came and went at odd hours, rarely talked with anyone in his building, and seldom hung out with anyone. According to his remote colleagues, he had not been in touch for almost a week before he was found.

In contrast, Nadeem had worked with other people in Sequoia on a regular basis and seemed to keep normal hours. He had also seemed to do a few normal things such as drink coffee in a cafe and chat with the barista. So far, a couple of people - Vidya and Shahid - had been able to describe him. And Tozi - god bless her - had come up with some potentially relevant material from Nadeem's pre-Sequoia past.

Why would someone want to kill a researcher and a musician? The first murder had all the hallmarks of being a spur-of-the-moment crime. The perpetrator had grabbed whatever weapon that had been available. The second murder seemed like it was meticulously planned. Nothing opportunistic about it. Someone must have been with Nadeem to have fed him the sleeping pill at some point in the evening. Then that someone must have worked out a way to move the unconscious Nadeem to the park. Finally, they must have hung Nadeem in a public park without anyone seeing them do so.

So far, there was nothing to connect Qasim and Nadeem. There was no apparent motive for both murders. Nothing had been stolen. It didn't seem that Qasim and Nadeem had caused anyone any harm of any kind. They barely seemed to have talked with other people. For five years, nothing. And then suddenly they were murdered in



quick succession.

Was the motive religious? Alia knew that practically every single person in Sequoia came from troubled parts of the world. Men preying on women had been a common occurrence. Conflicts arising out of religion, race, culture, caste, and all kinds of tribal identities happened routinely and were often extremely violent. This had been one of the primary reason why Sequoia's residents were selected in such a way that no one was related to each other as far as possible. They had actually used DNA mapping to ensure this. No one was even from the same village. The goal was to not have any pre-existing tribal identities carrying over from their place of origin to Sequoia.

For five years, there had been no violence of the tribal kind. Sure, there had been numerous inter-personal conflicts that had at times led to minor violence. Many of them had been the result of misunderstandings as lack of a common language had been a problem for the first few months. Misunderstandings also arose from ignorance about each others' cultures and norms and behavioral patterns. As no one was keen on getting thrown out of Sequoia for misbehaving, all those inter-personal conflicts had been quickly and amicably resolved. At times cops had to be brought in, of course. But to a large extent, people had tried to resolve their differences on their own. The cops also had made every effort to keep those interventions unofficial. They had tried to, primarily, nudge the aggrieved parties to sort their problems out. At most, the cops would mediate. This had worked quite well so far.

The downside of the process of selection - e.g. no relatives - was that everyone was, literally, on their own and had to build their social networks from scratch. Some folks found that easy while others didn't. Alia was in the latter group. While she was generally sociable, she was a quintessential introvert. In a group setting, especially, of strangers, she was not likely to be the one to speak first or at all. Maria was the opposite. But the real queen of the social world was Nadia. She was, immediately, the beating heart of any gathering.

On top of that, the lack of a common language was a huge barrier to form those networks. To a large extent, though, the language barrier had been overcome through the constant use of universal translators that were ubiquitous on everyone's wrist. But the ones who struggled, did struggle a lot. On the plus side, there was the lack of any consequential tribal form of organizing. Or was that really the case?

Alia started to jot down tasks for her team. In addition to doing those tasks, she wanted them to keep their eyes and ears open to organizations that appeared to have a tribal slant. This was going to be a challenging ask. She was not even sure what signs they should look for and how they should interpret them. Maybe, Tozi could come up with some tips based on her scans of social media. Maybe, she should discuss this with Sonia before talking with the team.

As if on cue, Sonia poked her head into Alia's reverie, "how's it going?"

"Good timing, boss. I was just about to come look for you," said Alia as she continued to jot down her list of tasks before she forgot something important.

"Tell me!" Sonia said brightly as she delicately perched herself on the corner of Alia's desk.

"Not much to go on, so far," Alia said, carefully.

"Early days, Alia... early days. Keep digging. Something will pop out, I am sure.

This murder happened in the middle of our city and was pre-meditated. There must be some trail left behind by the killer."

Alia nodded.

Sonia knew what was going on through Alia's mind. She added gently, "Qasim was different. We knew that would be hard to solve right from the beginning."

Alia didn't react. It was nice that Sonia was not judging her performance. Yet. Nevertheless, Alia was not happy with her failure to solve the case so far. She was not being harsh on herself. She knew that Sonia was objectively right. Yet, in her eyes the outcome was not what it should be. The killer should have been found and punished. Anything other than that was wrong, however, realistic and pragmatic it seemed. Alia's particular form of idealism was what kept her on her toes all the time. Another person may have taken their boss up on this way of thinking in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility. But such moments only made her uncomfortable. And as always, she dealt with it by moving on to talk about something else.

"Leela has managed to pin the time of death to a small window, midnight to 2 am. The death was by strangulation even though they found quite a bit of sleep medication in his blood. Which means he was intentionally drugged. That implies the killer had to move him to the park. So... there is that."

"Excellent! Then there must be some witnesses. C'mon! It is a city of three million souls living in close proximity with each other. Sure, it was late at night. But it is summer and the murder happened in a public park. This is good news, Alia. You may want to consider doing a public announcement to see if anyone would like to step forward with information."

"I agree. We should do that. I shall get you a draft of the press release later today. Also, we are going to need more help. Do you think you can make some more uniforms available to us? For answering phones and chasing down details once the tips start coming in?"

"Absolutely! Tell me what you need. Although, I am going to have to keep track of the budget. We blew through quite a bit of it during the investigation into Qasim's murder. I am going to have to go to the Council and get some additional resources approved. Any other leads?"

"Since Tozi managed to dig something up on Nadeem from his life before Sequoia, I was wondering if we should ask for some help from the Interpol to get in touch with the Nadeem's home country law enforcement folks."

"Hmmm... where was Nadeem from, again?"

"Sudan."

Sonia sighed, a bit too theatrically than was warranted.

"You know as well as I do, Alia, a country such as Sudan is in dire straits. God knows how many years it has been since they last got some relief from the drought. I am not sure we are going to reach anyone there who could find something useful for us. They probably don't even have records worth sharing with us. I wouldn't hope for much. But, in order to not leave any stone unturned, I will get the ball rolling with the Interpol. I hope they don't ask us for funds!"

"Thanks. I just have this nagging feeling that both the murders may have to do with something with their past, that is from their lives before Sequoia."

"Why do you feel that?"

"With Qasim, we know for sure that he was a total loner. No social circle within Sequoia to speak of. With Nadeem, I am getting a somewhat similar vibe. It is too soon to say for sure. But he does sound like he wasn't particularly close with anyone. Maybe it is 'man' thing."

She chuckled and added, "maybe we should check with Santosh and Carlos about their social circles! After all, Sequoia is a strange place. Women outnumber men by two to one. And men don't run anything. Who knows... how much of this has distorted the usual social dynamics of men. Apart from our colleagues, I hardly hang out with

any men.”

“So bloody true,” thought Sonia.

Alia continued to think aloud, “with Qasim, nobody seemed to have much of anything to do with him. He stayed out of trouble. To be able to antagonize someone, there needs to be some meaningful interaction. We didn’t see that with him, at all. He spent a lot of his time camping outside of Sequoia. Most of his interactions were with folks based far away from Sequoia. Maybe we need to interview them more closely to see if they remember anything he might have said about his past life.

We shall know more about Nadeem as we dig further. I sure hope that he chatted with someone somewhere. We are just not seeing even the hint of a motive yet. Establishing means and opportunity is not likely to be a problem.”

“Hmm... has anything turned up in the search of their places? I know Qasim lived a very spartan life. Although - I remember - we found some personal stuff at his campsite. Some photos and souvenirs. Did we ever manage to track them down?”

“No - we didn’t find any real leads from those. But I think that maybe we didn’t try hard enough. I will get Tozi to see if she can find any visual matches for those pieces online. We have been spread quite thin with the interviews. We had to cast a really wide net!”

“So - this is all a gut feeling? I mean, this hope that the murders are connected to something from their past?”

Sonia looked carefully at Alia as she asked that question. In her opinion, there was absolutely nothing wrong about going with the gut. And a gut such as Alia’s was something worth going with. Always. Alia - in her judgment - possessed an excellent combination of a logical brain and an instinctive grasp of how various pieces of a puzzle fit together. But still, she really wanted her top investigator to be more deliberate about this. The budget was indeed getting tight and cajoling the Interpol to do anything quickly was going to be tiresome. In general, the Interpol tended to ignore their queries until Sonia made a song and dance about them with the right folks at the UN.

“The way I think about this, boss, is that it has been a difficult adjustment for most of us. We all left our homes five years ago knowing full well that we can never go back. In a way, it was a choice we made, but maybe it was not really a choice. We all left because it was an extremely difficult life. It was the innate survival instinct that dictated our actions. And we came here alone, literally. At the same time, not really alone in a very fundamental sense of the word. We may not be with our families and friends and the society that we grew up in. We are here - instead - with people who came here for

the same reason. I guess... one could even say that we have more in common with each other in Sequoia than we ever had with the society that we left behind." Alia paused to gather her thoughts.

"We share a unique kind of camaraderie because our individual futures are dependent on us succeeding together. Collectively. We are, in my view, a forward-looking bunch of individuals who are forming a new kind of society. A society that is not based on any shared attribute, as traditional societies have been, but on shared objectives about our futures."

Sonia was nodding her head in agreement.

"Maybe, Alia, that was the cause. I mean, maybe Qasim or Nadeem or both of them were impeding our future in some way and that is why someone decided to do something about it."

Alia was silent for a while as she worked through this possibility.

"Sure. That is possible. But I would say, very unlikely. None of us has a clear picture about our future, yet. We are barely getting settled here. Getting to know each other a bit. I am not sure a violent reaction can be caused for something so vague and hazy. I would be quite surprised if that was the motive.

But, I do see the past having such a powerful hold on someone that it would compel that person to commit a murder. I do think that is a far more likely possibility than what you are suggesting. We may not be brooding much on our past as I was saying earlier. But some trauma can be deep-seated and it can trigger such a violent action."

"Fair point. I trust your instincts any day over mine. Go for it!"

"There is one thing that I want to flag, though," Alia paused as Sonia turned back toward her.

"Yesterday, Santosh and I interviewed one of Nadeem's neighbors. He runs a cafe in Nadeem's building and seems to be one of the few people who had known Nadeem. This guy - Shahid - went off on a tangent pretty much right from the start of the interview. He made it sound as if this was some anti-Muslim pogrom. Qasim had definitely been seen in the mosque on a few Fridays. We shall check out the mosque to see if Nadeem prayed there, too.

What worries me is that people like Shahid may turn this into something where there is nothing. I guess - it is possible that someone targeted these two victims because they

were devout Muslims. But we don't have any indication of that. At the same time - hardly anyone waits for actual evidence to form opinions anyway. People do love to jump to conclusions. I am hoping that Shahid is an outlier that we can ignore. It just - you know - left a bad taste after that interview."

Sonia thought, "it was, most definitely, not good!" Then she promptly forgot about it. Until a few days later when the topic popped up again in a totally different conversation and in a far more serious context.

## Chapter Nine

The Pope's assistant, John Murphy, was reviewing his notes before his daily briefing for His Holiness. The Catholic Church had been steadily losing followers for decades and it was not alone in this predicament. None of the major world religions were able to provide the succor their followers were desperately seeking in the increasingly turbulent times. How could the followers continue to bring themselves to believe in a higher power if that higher power seemed to feel no compunction in letting them suffer all the time?

Worse, the major religions were singularly inept at competing with the sheer showmanship of the charlatans. The literally mind-blowing displays accompanying each sermon made full use of the entertainment industry's state-of-the-art skills. It created a magical mixture of exhilaration and numbness in the minds of the audience. That instant relief was akin to a drug that distracted the followers long enough for the charlatan to rip them off. Eventually, those victims would free themselves from the charlatan's hypnotic control. Unfortunately, rather than learning from that experience, they would promptly choose another one to follow. And, in all likelihood, get victimized all over again.

Murphy, an Irish middle-aged man, sighed. This just happened to be the day when he was supposed to summarize the data about church attendance from across the world. The charts - like the corners of his mouth - glumly pointed down. He was not looking forward to sharing that data with His Holiness and the other staff. It invariably descended into another round of fruitless bickering and unnecessary recriminations.

Among the news headlines that had caught his eye that morning, was the news about the second-ever murder in Sequoia. That curious little city up by the north pole had more or less vanished from news over the last five years. There had been some hope when the city was being populated, that it would welcome the Catholic Church. After all, the entire population consisted of lonely people who came from the poorest and most climate-impacted places in the world. They would all need some spiritual help.

The Catholic Church had, along with most other religious institutions, lavished charity on Sequoia. Strangely, there had been no substantive response to those generous enticements. Maybe most of those folks were too numb from the shock of their relocation to have any capacity left to engage with the spiritual world. Murphy had shrugged that off as yet another instance in a growing list of failures.

Most folks around the world had lost interest in Sequoia a while ago. All that had changed within the last month. Apparently, after the first five years of no deaths (and no births either!) there had been not one but two murders within a few days of each other.

The one and only thing that was common between the two murders was that both the victims were, apparently, Muslim men.

As is the instinct of most people, sure enough, the journalist (or was it some vapid opinion-writer?) had established a trend by connecting two data points. Really, Murphy thought, people need to be able to distinguish between data and anecdotes. This was one of his pet peeves - people extrapolating when they shouldn't be. Murphy had scanned through several sources of news from around the world and it became quickly apparent to him that the Muslim rabble-rousers had already started pointing to this "trend" as proof that Muslims were not safe anywhere including Sequoia. This was, especially, galling because Sequoia was established for the express purpose of moving people from unsafe places to safe places. The usual garbage about persecution had been dusted off amazingly quickly. The references to the millennium-old crusades were not far behind.

This was the difference between the old religious institutions and the fly-by-the-night hucksters. The old institutions had survived for centuries because they had taken the long view while these frauds were in it solely for short term gain. Almost like the cut-throat capitalists, there had to be a return on investment and that too in the next quarter! Else, their followers would leave them in the same way shareholders abandoned the stock of the companies that were deemed to not have delivered big returns in every single quarter. Maybe the old institutions needed to find a better balance between taking the long view and the near term developments. Or else these old institutions might not survive.

All these thoughts about long- and short-term views reminded him of the famous Keynes quip, "in the long run, we are all dead!" Murphy had read economics and politics in Dublin before he found religion. He had always been good at math. It had been a simple choice for him between science and economics. He had not enjoyed science in school and hence, economics it was. He had fancied himself as a political economist who would shape the thinking of the world. But within two years of college, he had become disappointed by the ephemeral nature of the ideas that he was learning. He had briefly considered switching to science - maybe, Physics - but there also he felt that too many core ideas about how the universe worked were still being refined. He was thoroughly dispirited by all this constant evolution. It kept him on the edge, never allowing him to settle down. He didn't like that feeling at all.

One day, he had been sitting in the back row of a church, when he started listening to the priest's service. He hadn't even realized that it was a Sunday and this was the weekly mass that he had walked into. He had been whiling away his time by biking through the hills near Dublin all summer wondering what to do with his life. That day, the uphill ride had been quite steep and the sun had been, especially, hot and relentless. Not a cloud in sight all morning. He had felt a bit light-headed and entered through the first open door he had come across. It had been that of the church. And



his life had changed. He had found certainty in the venerable priest's service that morning. He, no longer had any doubt about his true calling from that moment on.

Murphy glanced through the open window that looked over the oval ground in front of the Basilica. Tourists had started gathering. It was another hot day in the Vatican. Many tourists were carrying parasols and umbrellas to find some respite from the sun. As usual, the touring groups were the first ones to arrive and congregate in the oval. He had gotten good at recognizing from afar which groups were from which country. The Chinese and Indian groups were always the largest ones and most common ones. No surprise there! The Chinese tourists dressed very conservatively while the Indian tourists were always easily identifiable because of their vibrantly colored clothing. Quite a visual contrast to see these groups gather around their tour leaders who were reciting the standard instructions about the dos and don'ts.

Murphy found it quite interesting how tourism to religious places never actually changed anybody's mind into adopting a new religion. Tourists - from all over the world - were somehow able to consistently maintain a distance between themselves and the place or people they were visiting. It was no different than humans going to a zoo to look at animals. If only that had not been the case! The Catholic Church would have had no trouble adding new devotees as the Vatican continued to draw in tens of millions of tourists, many of them not Christians, every year. They came and ooh-ed and aah-ed at the artwork in the Church's museum, ate the gelatos and pastas, took a gazillion pictures of every church in Rome, and then went back to their un-Christian lives.

Murphy stood up and started organizing the papers that would go into his attache. He was, momentarily, distracted by the sound of fire crackers going off in the oval. It was dangerous to do that in a crowd. But there wasn't much parents could do to keep their children in check. Kids will be kids. But even as he was mentally shrugging his shoulders at that thought, he heard several screams. They seemed too loud to be caused by the fear of a kid's firecrackers. Murphy rushed to the window and was aghast to see the carnage that had taken place in mere seconds. Several people were lying covered in blood. He couldn't understand what was happening even when somewhere in the back of his mind he kept hearing the firecrackers. And then he saw the two gunmen gliding through the crowd smoothly as they ruthlessly mowed down the people in a hail of bullets.

They looked too stable to be running and were probably using a hoverboard, Murphy thought subconsciously. More people keeled over as they got cut down by the killers who were shouting something as they kept going. Pieces of paper were also fluttering all around them as if they had disturbed a flock of white pigeons. It was happening so fast that Murphy's brain was the only thing functioning while his body had become completely paralyzed. But all that changed in an instant when a stray bullet hit the window where he was standing. The shards of glass hit him as if in slow motion.

Instinctively, he dropped down with both his arms covering his head.

Then as if by magic, both the gunmen crumpled up in the same instant as the snipers finally managed to nail their moving targets. Of course - the Vatican had snipers posted all around the oval for exactly this kind of a situation. Unfortunately, they had been too slow in killing the two gunmen because the gunmen had been moving really fast and in an unpredictable manner. And that too in the middle of the crowd. The snipers had been, rightfully, reluctant in taking multiple shots as they feared they might hit innocent people.

Once he felt sure that the shooting had indeed stopped, he stood up careful to maintain a safe distance from the window. To Murphy, the tableau seemed inconceivable. The pop-pop of the guns had stopped and the screaming had ratcheted up in a big way as the survivors of the assault came out of their daze. The long drawn out wails of the injured then seamlessly blended into the sirens of the emergency vehicles. Loud screeches of tires spinning pierced through them, as the police cars and ambulances pulled up to the oval.

The entire oval felt like an artist had gone berserk and splashed red paint around willy nilly with all his paintbrushes. To Murphy's conservative sensibility, this Jackson Pollock-like image was unspeakably disgusting. He finally regained his will to look away from it. He was still shaking as the adrenalin continued to course through his veins when the door to his office was whipped open and a Swiss Guard swept in without any warning. He stumbled back toward the window as if hit by a truck and almost over-pitched through the window before the Swiss Guard pulled him back into the room.

"Sir... are you alright?" he asked calmly.

"Yes... yes... I... I am fine," Murphy managed to stammer out as a part of his mind was marveling at how this youngster was able to stay calm through this upheaval.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Sir - if you are okay, then I shall go and check on the other staff members. My superior will come and brief you on the situation in a few minutes."

Murphy nodded and sat down heavily in his chair.

As the guard bolted out of the room, he felt sick as bile rose up in his throat. He had barely managed to grab the waste basket when he threw up several times. There wasn't much that came up as he had not had any breakfast yet. He was still retching

when he heard clipped footsteps approaching his desk. The Captain of the Swiss Guard had arrived.

“Sir - may I request you to come with me to His Holiness’ chamber?” the Captain asked urgently. Unlike the young guard, the Captain seemed to have been far more affected by the tragedy. His face was crisscrossed with lines of worry.

“Yes - you go ahead. I will follow you in a few minutes. I need to use the bathroom to tidy myself up,” Murphy waved at him without looking up. He was still feeling sick. Even if he had wanted to, he wouldn’t have been able to stand up immediately. He was completely drained of strength after throwing up. He needed a few minutes just to catch his breath.

“Okay! Please be there in five minutes,” said the Captain. It was obvious that the Assistant must have seen the carnage from his window unlike His Holiness who had been in the process of dressing for the day and had neither heard nor seen anything until the Captain had gone over to his quarters.

Murphy rinsed his mouth and washed his face with cold water. That seemed to do the trick. He felt much stronger and refreshed. He straightened his clothes that had somehow gotten all twisted up when he had thrown up. They, most definitely, did not look as freshly pressed as they had been a few minutes ago. But they would have to do. He drank a couple of glasses of the cold water. It tasted bitter at first and then sweet.

His Holiness was calmly sitting at his desk while the Captain stood in front of him across the desk. A couple of His Holiness’ senior staff were standing on the far side of the desk as Murphy entered the room. The door had been left open and there was obviously no need to knock under the circumstances. Murphy went and stood by the side of His Holiness. His Holiness waved the Captain to get started with his briefing.

“Your Holiness, it was a terrorist attack. There were two gunmen who were shot down by our security team. There are numerous casualties. We don’t yet know how many are dead and how many injured. Once I get the report, I shall bring it to you,” the Captain spoke calmly and precisely. Not one unnecessary word anywhere. Simple and short sentences with no ambiguity whatsoever.

Murphy asked, “who were they and why did they attack?”

Even though Murphy had asked the question, as was the practice, the Captain continued to address His Holiness.

“They appear to be Muslims. We don’t know their identities yet. They were shouting ‘Alla-hu-Akbar’ as per the accounts of our security team. They also had flyers that were falling through their satchels. The flyers had the pictures of two men. Both the men in those photos appear to be Muslim based on the names printed below the pictures. The rest of the flyer clearly states that this was an act of vengeance. The two gunmen, it seems, were avenging the wrongful deaths of the two men whose pictures were on the flyers.”

Again, the clipped precision from the Captain. While one part of Murphy was listening to the Captain and observing him, another part of his mind was wildly gesticulating. Murphy knew the answer to his question even before the Captain replied.

“By any chance were the names of the two men on those flyers Qasim and Nadeem?”

The Captain was taken aback and lost his composure for a brief moment as he took his eyes off His Holiness and stared at Murphy as if he was seeing a ghost.

“How did you know that?” the Captain had forgotten the protocols in this moment of disbelief.

“Your Holiness,” Murphy turned and said, “the two young men mentioned in the flyer had been murdered in the last few days in the refugee city of Sequoia. Qasim was murdered four weeks ago and Nadeem, last week. I had read the news but had not felt it important enough to include in your daily briefing. I had assumed that the two murders were local affairs and not of importance to us.

In any case, the few details that I had seen, suggested that the murders were not connected. There didn’t seem to be any indication of religious violence. Now, after all this, it seems that there are at least a few who think otherwise. And going by the scale of the tragedy that happened a few minutes ago, these people feel so, quite strongly.”

“Oh dear!” His Holiness murmured.

## Chapter Ten

The irony of this particular rally was not lost on Jake as he rode his thundering bike, excessively festooned with confederate flags, down Massachusetts Avenue in Washington DC. Not a single Christian person had died in the Vatican massacre. All of the fatalities and injured victims were either Chinese communists or Indian Hindus. Yet, he had been ordered a few days ago to organize a Christian rally bang through the middle of DC.

In true foot-soldier fashion, Jake had gotten the ball rolling through the various outreach mechanisms that he operated for his chapter. The messages were fully synchronized across all the platforms of live media and social media ensuring that there was a simple theme around which rallies would be organized all over the US. The theme was, "Christians are under attack." It was not a particularly new theme, but then the terrorism incident at the Vatican was merely an excuse to flex muscles yet again. Facts had stopped being relevant for Christian organizations in the US, and for that matter all over the world, a long time ago. The goal was to manufacture outrage through victimhood in order to keep the flock together. The topics pertaining to material well-being that the progressives wanted to talk about had mostly been driven out from the political discourse.

The rally was to start on top of the hill in northwestern DC, at the stairs of the Washington National Cathedral. Yes, these days, they made it a point to highlight the overt religiosity of the rally. Then, it was to proceed down Massachusetts Avenue where many of the Embassies were located and on to Dupont Circle where it would turn on to Connecticut Avenue and head for the Ellipse in front of the White House. It was meant to make a point to all the nations and the current occupants of both the White House and the Naval Observatory. Usually, this route would never have been permitted because of the presence of so many international buildings. But then, the current party in charge of the government was a big fan of such religious fervor. Of course, they would be allowed to barge through this security-conscious area.

Jake was a poster-child for the white Christian nationalist organization that he had been part of since he left high-school. He was tall and muscular with sleepy light gray eyes. His blonde hair was closely cropped but he nourished glorious burnsides. If not for that, he would have looked like the shy 30-year old that he really was. Not this scary impression of a foot-soldier in the army of Christ.

What most people missed about Jake though was the clever mind that kept ticking along all the time in the background. He made sure that that fact was kept under wraps because his organization didn't like independent thinkers. He had gravitated to the organization for an absolutely mundane reason - there were plenty of girls always

hanging out at the local chapter's office and they were always up for a good time with the good ol' boys. He knew that he was never going to be able to afford college. Even if his parents had money for his college, they would have never allowed him to go to one of those heathen colleges. His best shot at having a good life had been to join right-wing politics. His hormones and his parents' views aligned wonderfully when he announced that he had joined the local chapter as a volunteer.

He didn't have much of an opinion about religion and race until he joined his organization. But the colossal amount of brainwashing that he was subjected to in the initial years did a number on him. He would frequently drive around on his motorbike, brandishing a shot gun, yelling at anyone who didn't look like a white Christian. Getting in trouble a few times for unlawful activities - for example, beating up some black or brown dude in a bar - was his ticket to a rapid rise in his organization. It was never serious trouble because invariably the cops were sympathetic to his cause and more often than not the public slap on the wrist was later offset with a drink at the local dive when the same cops were off-duty.

The problem was Jake's conscience. It started really struggling with the orders he was being given. The chasm between the kool-aid he had been force-fed and the reality was becoming more and more apparent every day. For starters, he rarely ran into any non-white non-Christian person in the real world. Rural America just didn't have those kind of people. The few that he ran into were mostly trying to stay out of sight as much as possible because of fear. The last thing on their mind was attacking a white Christian person. They barely even raised their head when spoken to. He started wondering how in god's name he was supposed to feel threatened by these petrified people.

Initially, he simply told himself that it may not be happening where he lived but it definitely happened in other parts of the world. But that also didn't seem to be accurate the closer he looked at what was going on around the world. Sure, the US seemed to be stuck in some kind of Cold War with China and yes, there sure were far more Chinese than Americans in the world. However, it didn't seem like the Chinese were interested in crossing the huge Pacific ocean and invading the US any time in the near future, if ever. The American economy was a juggernaut compared to the Chinese, especially, as Europe tended to often side with the Americans. The rest of the world - the Indians, the Africans, the Arabs, the Latin Americans - they all just preferred to stay on the sidelines trying not to piss off both the US and the Chinese as far as possible. There was simply no threat to the US in any shape or form.

He had been quietly reading books - yes, even those that were banned by his organization - to deal with the increasingly insistent voice in his head that kept pointing out discrepancies between the realities, the alternate and the real one. He had a burner phone on which he accessed all kinds of material and then instead of picking fights with random people, he thought and thought as he drove around his little part of

the US. The voice in his head just became louder the more he read and thought. It had not yet caused an existential crisis for him as he was still one of the top dogs in his organization. And that still gave him quite a high. He did what needed to be done but increasingly dispassionately. His sleepy eyes and poker face served as excellent allies in keeping up the pretense of being a lunkhead.

He looked around with a smug look on his face - well, at least he thought he was giving a smug look even though there was no difference between this look and when he was feeling all humble - at his fellow rally-goers. In a very showy manner, he wrenched the accelerator of his bike, his big muscles tensing up in the hot sun. The sound deepened and the rumble seemed to shake the ground around him just that little bit and the exhaust belched. Funny thing, his bike was electric but tricked out in such a way as to look, sound, and smell like a regular bike running on gasoline. Right-wing folks were partial to gasoline bikes and trucks even though it was incredibly stupid to use the wildly expensive fuel. Unfortunately, it was now a part of the performance - "American oil and gas!" - that the right-wing continued to feel compelled to rely on. Jake had got a custom-made electric bike that looked the same as a typical gasoline bike. He had rigged an audio system with an, especially, powerful sub-woofer that went well beyond imitating the rumble of an old-school road hog. Then there was a smoke machine hooked up into the fake exhaust system that produced copious amounts of dirty smoke on demand. So far no one had noticed that it was not as foul-smelling as that of a typical old Harley. No one noticed these things because the bike was decked up with the usual paraphernalia proclaiming the superiority of white power. Idiots! The only thing he needed to make sure of was to not race these idiots ever. His run-of-the-mill electric bike would have wiped the floor with those gas hogs and more! Maybe that smug look on his face was not so fake after all, but simply aimed in the wrong direction.

His boss was at the front of the rally procession sitting on top of the hub of a monster truck with a megaphone in his hand while he shot t-shirts at the crowd that had gathered to watch. Every now and then he had to rest his delicate throat from all the screaming. To a large extent, this rally was a pretty standard issue event to remind folks of who they were and that they still had the clout to make a mess of the evening commute. The federal government had become somnolent a while ago. Even a knowledgeable person like Jake was hard-pressed to remember the last round of meaningful legislation passed by Congress AND signed by the President. It was mostly theater. They were all a bunch of peacocks in Washington DC who preened all day long in front of the cameras. Not a single meaningful word came out of their mouths. It was like a crap reality show that never ended. Cast members seldom changed in this show as the incumbents were rarely challenged in any serious manner. Both parties had locked up their fiefdoms so tightly that there was not much chance of power shifting toward either side in any substantive manner. And that is why he and his organization had to do these rallies in DC. To help keep keep their side on top in this fragile tussle as long as possible.

What was somewhat unusual about today's rally, Jake felt, was that the number of folks

that seemed to have showed up was quite a bit more than he had expected. Maybe it was the nice weather. Maybe the news that the “Vatican had been attacked!” had resonated a lot more than he had imagined. It was getting a bit hard to figure out which thing would stick in the minds of the public and which would slide right off. Another score for Jake. The boss was sure to notice the size of this crowd and would acknowledge Jake later for pulling this together so quickly. All is good, Jake thought.

Just when he was about to “rev up” his bike and move toward the front of the procession, he heard the sound of some new slogan being shouted. It sounded like hissing. It was just one word being repeated incessantly. He couldn’t really make out the word over the loud reverberation of the sub-woofer installed right under his seat. He slowed down and simultaneously turned down the volume on the subwoofer with the special dial installed right next to the accelerator. The slogan burst through the immediate din around him. “Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill the towel-heads! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill the towel-heads!”

Shouting about killing all kinds of folks was not at all uncommon at such rallies. Yet, there was something quite ominous about this slogan. It seemed to be resonating from the ground up. He saw that some of his fellow rally-goers had also noticed this new slogan. Maybe some new fringe group had joined in. This slogan was, most definitely, not part of the approved slogans to be used in the rally. These days, in order to drive up the recruitment numbers, they had all been told to dial down the violent slogans and dial up the white victimhood angle. That was designed, explicitly, to raise sympathy and bring in much-needed recruits to their movement.

Jake’s boss continued his screaming from the megaphone at a higher volume hell-bent on drowning out the new sloganeering. His boss was not pleased that his show was being commandeered by someone else. As he shouted and waved his hand, the boss looked around to find Jake. When his eyes landed on Jake, he gestured at him to go take care of this new problem. Message discipline was paramount. It was the foundation on which the right-wing had built its political power. The left-wing had no message discipline at all and hence, had been struggling with stringing together even modest wins at any level of the government. Mobilizing at the national level was no longer even an aspiration of the left.

Jake acknowledged his boss and wheeled his bike around to the side so that he could go hunt down the folks who were breaking the ranks with this new slogan. Just for a moment, he forgot to dial up the volume and the smoke as he turned the accelerator. The bike sped up noiselessly and he panicked. Luckily, the tires had spun so fast that the crunching sound covered up the lack of the engine rumble while the smell of burnt tire rubber and tar overwhelmed the lack of exhaust. He quickly spun the dial and punched the smoke machine before anyone discovered his secret.

Within a few minutes he found the cohort who was hissing the violent word again and



again. They were dressed in surplus army gear and carried rifles. There were no banners among them. The common thing was that they were all old, probably well in their 60s and 70s. And they had a harsh, utterly pitiless look in their eyes. They didn't notice Jake until he waved his free arm a bit more vigorously.

"What gives folks? This is not the slogan we had been told to use today," Jake said in his most pleasant voice. The young 'un act usually worked like a charm on the oldies. They continued with their march, and yes, it was a march, Jake noticed. They were marching like a platoon or whatever army grunts marched in. One of the oldies peeled off and walked up to him.

"We are not with you, son!" he growled.

"Say again, grandpa?" Jake held his ground while mildly revving up the sub-woofer on his bike.

"We should have finished off these towel-heads way back during the crusades a thousand years ago. We let them live. We had another chance to do that with the two Bushies in the White House. But, again we decided to be benevolent. No more. We are gonna get the job done this time around! Gotta kill every last one of 'em. They have been a menace to the world for far too long."

"Whoa... whoa... slow down, Sir," Jake switched off his bike, put it on the side-stand and approached the oldie.

"What are you talkin' about, old man? There ain't no war going on right now. We ain't talking about killing anyone right now," Jake decided that playing the reasonable junior but physically superior guy was the best approach to deal with this wiry bent old guy.

"Anyway we are the top dogs in the world and there ain't anybody threatening us. No one even has the balls to look us in the eye!"

"Stand down, son. We have bled for America. We have been to hell and back. We know how bad the ground situation is. All you young 'uns and politicians in DC are gonna do is pussy-foot around on TV and your social media and do nothing else. We are gonna get this shit done once and for all. Stand down or I will blow your head off," he snarled.

As if on cue, the air was suddenly filled with gunfire as all the oldies started shooting at the sky. Now those were reverberations, Jake thought. The ground shook as if there was an earthquake and the smell of hot metal was everywhere. The cops who had been milling around the procession were caught completely off-guard with this sudden

gunfire. This was supposed to be yet another rally through the town. Most of the rally-goers hadn't even brought weapons and whatever weapons that were on display were not loaded. They were, specifically, for show. This was totally different. As their training kicked in, the cops took cover and pulled out their weapons quickly. They started scanning the procession to ascertain where the gunfire was coming from and if there were any casualties. Their commander cursed fluently. This was not gonna look good on the evening news. He could already hear his boss chewing his head off later that day.

The cops realized that the gunfire was not aimed at anyone. All the guns had been pointed straight up in the air. A broad swathe of Massachusetts Avenue was now covered with shell casings. The cops looked at each other uncertainly. They were not sure what to do next. No one seemed to have been hurt. What the hell was going on?

Just as it had started, the gunfire ceased in unison and there was a deathly silence.

"Shit!" thought Jake. These guys are not kidding round. They just fired a shit ton of weapons right next to the Veep's home. No one from their side was supposed to pull this kind of stunt in DC. The Veep and President were on their side, for chrissakes!

Jake now noticed that the procession was entering Washington DC's Embassy Row. But there was one building that was not an embassy and the procession had stopped right in front of it. The Islamic Center. It was not just a typical cultural center in DC that hosted events but it was also a mosque. In fact, when it had opened in 1957, it was the largest mosque in the entire western hemisphere. It also happened to be a Friday, the holy day for prayer in Islam.

Unbeknownst to the cops, the namaaz in the mosque had ended and the doors opened to let out a stream of devotees who had heard the gunfire and were now fearfully looking at the procession on the street from beyond the iron fence.

About fifty of the guys with rifles broke ranks and formed up again in a line outside the fence separating them from the mosque and the muslim devotees. All those guys were wearing military-grade camouflage gear and had their faces covered in war paint.

As if it was happening in slow motion, Jake noticed this posse line up. The hair at the back of his neck stood up. He knew what was going to happen before it did. As bile rose up in his throat, he saw the posse get into position. In unison, the safeties went to off position and the thunder of gunfire erupted again. The difference was that the guns were no longer pointed at the sky but at the people inside the Islamic Center - unarmed people, many of whom were kids and women. It was all over in a few seconds as the posse emptied its magazines in the crowd of devotees. And then the sound of gunfire ceased - again in unison. But it did not get silent. Instead, the

atmosphere was filled with heart-wrenching agony as those that had not been killed found their voices.

The message had been delivered to the world loud and clear.

Then it was time to get out of Dodge and pronto. The posse had vanished like smoke even as the cops and the other rally-goers were trying to figure out what had just happened.

Over the next few days, it dawned on Jake that he was going to have to completely revise his career path. Rather than be angry about it, he was quite pleased with the thought of this. Maybe the world had reached another inflection point where there was a non-zero probability that the world could move toward a better future instead of the terrible one that he had resigned himself to.

# Chapter Eleven

Sara's actions had other consequences too, those that had not yet crossed her mind. She was starting to realize what could happen to her. Because of the complex web of human relations spanning both space and time, she had inadvertently unleashed mayhem that not only upended the peace in Sequoia, but went far and wide into the world. Of course, she had never intended to affect Sequoia, let alone the rest of the world. As best as she could make sense of her out-of-character actions was that she had, momentarily, lost all control of herself when she had killed Nadeem. She was not regretting his death. But she was certainly aghast that she had caused it. That was not her. It would not happen again, she vowed to herself.

Shahid's instinctive reaction when Alia and Santosh had questioned him was the second domino to fall in the ensuing mayhem. The thing with the "falling dominoes" metaphor is that the dominoes have to be placed together in the correct order and sufficiently close to each other for the first one to eventually cause the last one to fall. Put too large a domino next to the first one or put the second domino too far apart from the first one, and nothing much happens except the fall of the first domino.

The ubiquity of the internet, social media platforms, and a more or less permanently connected device in the hands of every human being on the planet had ensured the creation of an extremely sensitive and incredibly efficient system of dominoes. At the command of the owners of these social media platforms, the speed with which the dominoes fell could be controlled quite precisely. Or at least the owners thought so. In reality, the control was uni-directional: how to increase the speed of propagation. There really was no dial to slow things down. But they didn't really care much about slowing anything down. After all they liked to assert, "move fast and break things." No one among them ever said, "move slow and build things."

The human domino takes a lot more effort to topple for the simple reason that most humans don't really want to expend energy, whether physical or emotional. Very few, voluntarily, choose to climb hills, especially, steep ones. Most just prefer to lope downhill. That is, if they need to move in the first place! Similarly, very few people even make the effort to change someone else's mind let alone kill them because they disagree with them. After all, it takes a tremendous amount of effort to kill someone. And an even larger effort when the intended victim is fighting back. So, most humans simply prefer to find ways to get along with others as it takes the least effort on their part.

That is why, it takes extraordinary effort from someone to get not just one but many humans to hurt others. It is extraordinary because one has to know exactly which buttons to push and how firmly. In addition, appropriate tools are necessary to push

those buttons. The social media platforms that proliferated since the turn of the century were those tools. Very effective tools, especially, in the hands of the people with the most depraved intentions of all. Authoritarians that unleash wars were an example of those kind of people.

Of course, those button-pushing skills and the tools could also be deployed by good people to get others to do good things. Those who do these good things end up becoming the saints that people look up to. One key difference between the bad-intentioned actors and the good-intentioned ones is that the former don't want their followers to think for themselves, while the latter want the exact opposite. Being good is innate and that is what the saints have been relying on. But being bad requires one to shut down one's conscience completely.

Shahid was not wired, naturally, to go and kill someone. Just as Sara hadn't been. But the social media platforms through which they had maintained their connections with the world beyond Sequoia, had put them in such a position where their vulnerabilities could be harnessed for nefarious purposes. It is not as if they went and sought out the knowledge that exacerbated their pre-existing grievances. But neither did they realize that the platforms that they thought existed to help them get along with others, were being systematically used to trigger their worst instincts. So when Nadeem inadvertently crossed Sara's path, her worst instincts took charge of her actions without her realizing it until it was too late. The same thing was about to happen with Shahid.

The two triggers that are most effective in provoking a violent reaction in a person are the perception of being disrespected and treated unfairly. To be sure, these triggers don't have to actually exist. It is sufficient that the person only perceives the existence of those triggers to react to them. And react with extreme prejudice!

Sara's enduring sense of being treated unjustly all her life was the trigger that had led her to destroying Nadeem. In reality, Nadeem had not even seen her let alone touch her or harm her directly. In her mind, though, she saw no difference between him and his two gang-members who were the ones who had actually tortured and killed her family. To her, delivering justice to Nadeem was the same as punishing the real killers.

In Shahid's case, the trigger was perceived disrespect. As a Muslim growing up in Hindu-dominant India, his entire life had consisted of being treated as a second-class citizen at best. Most of the times, he was just invisible to the Hindus in power. He was a nobody. Except when the powerful Hindus were looking for some Muslim to make an example out of. The police had, typically, served as the designated henchmen for delivering the pain. In his eyes, Alia and Santosh were part of that same police force who had routinely abused him back in India. The way that Alia had questioned him, had left a perception of being absolutely humiliated in his mind. In reality, both Alia and Santosh had been professional and respectful. Ironically, both Alia and Santosh had themselves faced discrimination in their pre-Sequoia lives - Alia for being a Muslim

woman in Iran and Santosh for being part of a forest-dwelling tribe in India.

Nonetheless, that interaction was sufficient enough reason to tip Shahid into a vicious spiral of self-victimization that was further fed by the hatred flooding his social media feed. Yes, the term “feed” was indeed apt even if it may have been inadvertent. Shahid was being forcefully fed hatred. Which he voraciously and unwittingly consumed. Thus, a decent cafe barista and an art gallery owner in Sequoia became easily radicalized. The healing power of Sequoia had been overcome by the poison of hatred from far away lands. Shahid stewed in an ever-deepening pool of fetid emotions that inexorably led him to violence of the most horrific kind.

Tozi, who had already begun monitoring the social media platforms for collecting data on Nadeem (and Qasim), started seeing alarming signs of provocative forms of communications among the people of Sequoia. Other people living in far away places had also begun interacting with Sequoians around these deadly issues. Within a very short period of time, the sense of Muslim victimhood had exploded. And in almost no time, following that particular emotion, the notion of “jihad” (or holy war) started spiking in various places. Most disturbingly, thought Tozi with dismay, one of the spikes had shown up in Sequoia. She frantically scrolled through the histories of the most talkative voices on the various platforms and was stunned to see that this spike had come from nowhere. None of the voices had shown any sign of anger or violence whatsoever for the past five years. Then suddenly, as if someone had thrown a switch in their heads, the anger had been activated. It was the vicious kind which usually culminated in violence. Virtual at first, but she was sure that it would become real soon if something was not done to stop it in its tracks. She pulled together a short presentation with this data and sent it to Alia who then passed it on to Sonia.

Shahid was shaking with an odd mixture of fear and anger. He had just finished watching the videos of the Washington DC and New Delhi massacres that had taken over his social media feed. The fear was primal. He had been afraid all his life. Of violent death that could come for him at any moment. He had seen it take away many people since his childhood in India's Uttar Pradesh, one of its poorest and most violent states. He had seen his father's death. A memory that had started fading, especially, in the last five years, but which now had suddenly become vivid.

The anger was the unusual reaction in his case. At some point in his life, he didn't remember when, people had started treating him like a do-er and not a child or a victim. His family had actually started asking him for his advice. Even when he moved to Sequoia, his family had continued that practice. The fact that he was running a small business, a successful one at that, in Sequoia brought him even more respect from people beyond his immediate family. When he first got angry with someone back home, he was not sure who it was, probably his mother, he had seen the fear pop up in her eyes. He had felt ashamed immediately and tried to calm her down after that incident. But it had also felt... good. It was an entirely new feeling for him - to be able to

express anger at someone and then to be feared because of that. He was confused because he didn't really have much to feel angry about anyway. So that sense of power he had felt in that moment had fizzled out over time. Every now and then, he would become faux angry just to see the fear in the eyes of whoever he was talking with. It was like a guilty pleasure of sorts.

The anger that was coursing through him right now, though, was nothing like that. He had lashed out online and it had not satiated him at all. This was the kind of anger that seemed to seek something to consume. It was consuming him, no doubt. But that was not sufficient. Watching little children being mowed down by automatic rifles in the Washington DC mosque had driven him so mad with grief that he had cried all night, eventually falling asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Then on top of that came the bloody videos of families from Delhi. The violent mob had used swords to hack away at the cowering families. Then the mob had gone out of its way to gloat about it and film it for posterity. The revulsion that he had felt couldn't be expressed in words. Initially, he had been viscerally scared of getting killed by the Christians and Hindus in Sequoia. But that feeling had slowly passed as the anger started exerting its power on his heart. He had to do something. He decided that ranting online was not sufficient, he must act. He would not be a victim anymore. He was now someone that others feared. He was going to war. And in his mind, the first face that swam into focus was that of Santosh wearing that traditional Hindu red mark on his forehead. He decided that he was not going to merely hurt Santosh, but he was going to do something that would strike fear in the very hearts of the others. Make THEM quail in front of his fury. The time for mere words was over. It was now time to act!

Unfortunately, there were no countervailing ideas that Shahid could draw on that would have steered him away from the violent course of action that he had embarked upon. No voice of sanity, no voice of reason, no principles, no morals, no religion... just an utter absence of beliefs that could have pushed back on his violent impulses, firmly and unrelentingly. Sequoia had come into existence in a hurry. It was a physical place. It had a purpose in the sense that survival can be a purpose. And survival is not exactly a conscious purpose for most living beings, especially, humans who have long been inventing new ways to survive.

Sequoia took care of mere survival, in any case. There was shelter, food, water, and other basic necessities for living. The purpose of Sequoia was to somehow generate sufficient income to be allowed to exist in its current form. While that was a common goal for all Sequoians, it didn't easily translate into how someone should feel about something or what to do and not do. So people like Shahid and Sara simply fell back on the ways of thinking that they had grown up with - relying on family values or religious principles or societal norms that they were most familiar with. The passage of time had just not been long enough for a unique Sequoian way of life to fully emerge and get universally embraced. No one had even attempted to articulate what this new way of life could be. Then how would Sara and Shahid know how to think about the

issues that been thrown at their faces by life?



## Chapter Twelve

The team had been trickling into the incident room. Alia had noticed that everyone was quite subdued. The news of the shoot-out in the Vatican and its direct link to the two murders in Sequoia had no doubt affected all the members of her team. The subsequent massacres in places such as Washington DC had further dampened their spirit. The perpetrators of those massacres had clearly pointed out that their actions were to avenge the Vatican attack. The fanatics around the world had decided to use the excuse of the Sequoia murders to light an inferno that could burn everything down.

Usually, Tozi was colorfully attired. That day, it was all black with no other color visible. No sign of a head-dress nor any makeup adorning her face. Almost as if the real Tozi had decided to take the day off and sent in her shadow to work. Carlos always made it a point to seek out Alia's attention and smile at her enthusiastically every morning. Today, he could barely bring himself to look at her and nod. Definitely, no smiles today. And Nadia, the effervescent one, was walking as if all the weight of the world had been loaded on her shoulders. Instead of floating into the room all light-footed grace, she shuffled in like a sick old woman and sank in her chair. Santosh hadn't showed up yet. He was always punctual and when he was delayed, he invariably informed Alia beforehand. She glanced at her phone to see if there were any messages from him. But didn't see anything. She decided to give him a few more minutes before calling him.

They were all very much now in the collective spotlight of the entire world. Finding the perpetrators of both murders as soon as possible had become a topic of international importance. For almost five years, the world had left Sequoia alone. Treating it as an absurd little experiment playing out in a long forgotten corner of the world. That isolation was over now.

There had been several tense video conferences between Sequoia's city council and the UN. Sonia had been hauled in by the city council and then later made to brief the UN on the investigation team's progress. She had been grilled for several hours. Overnight everyone at the UN had become a detective and was giving her all kinds of advice about how to track down the killers in Sequoia. To her credit, Sonia had lost her temper only a couple of times during the actual briefing. Although, she did lose it numerous times when she was talking with the city council. Her dark eyes would flash dangerously when she was faced with people who knew far less about criminal investigations but still felt that they could give her advice.

After those frustrating conversations with the UN and the City Council, the previous evening, she had gone over to Alia's flat to both vent and check on the progress. The two murders were now pretty much the most important things to deal with for the

Sequoia police department. She didn't want to take over the investigation - yet - from Alia despite all the pressure from the city council and the UN. That would both undermine Alia's position as the lead investigator but more importantly, signal to the entire investigation team that they were not good enough to get the job done. With a young, creative, and enthusiastic team that was getting the hang of policing in a completely new urban environment such as Sequoia, nurturing the confidence was the key for ensuring the long-term success of the city. And if Sequoia did indeed become a success story, there would be more new and similar cities coming up. The experience of her team would be absolutely invaluable in training the police departments of those places then. For all her reputation of volatility, which was mostly relevant to how she communicated, Sonia had a very astute mind that weighed the pros and cons of every major decision from multiple perspectives.

"Boss - should we get going with the daily status report?" Tozi quietly asked Alia. She knew that Alia was in a tough situation and dealing with a lot of pressure. This was no longer just a murder investigation. This had spun out of control quite fast. The social media feeds that she had been monitoring were lit up with violent reactions. Alia looked up from her phone and said, "I was waiting for Santosh to join us as he has been following up with Nadeem's neighbors. I would like him to bring us all up to date on that."

That is when Sonia barged into the incident room, her usually dark brown complexion was several shades paler and those dark eyes were livid with anger. She was so angry that instead of shouting at them all, her voice went down to the lowest octave. Yet, the barely controlled fury and the terse low voice had no problem slamming into each and every team member.

"Santosh is dead. Someone slit his throat. His body was found a few minutes ago in a trash container by the garbage collectors. They called it in and I have already dispatched Leela and her team to the location."

For a few moments the room went completely silent. And then the dam broke. Sonia's eyes filled up with tears and she shouted, "what the hell is happening!" Santosh, our dear Santosh - gone? That kind quiet little guy who was always the most dependable and reliable person in the room. They all knew Santosh as well as anyone knew anyone else in Sequoia. Literally, no one had ever thought negatively about Santosh. No one had even said anything bad about him behind his back. Who would want to kill him in this gruesome manner?

Alia had gone cold. Sadness and anger were locked in a death match in her mind. Her hands were clenched till the knuckles gleamed white, all the muscles tensed up to lash out and give way to the anger seething inside her. At the same time, tears had moistened her eyes and she felt a sob coming up to the surface. She wanted to just cry and let it all out. Neither was the right thing to do in front of her team. She must hold it

all in until she had a moment to herself. Her team was not just under the hammer, but now they were also scared because one of them had been brutally killed.

She got up from her seat and went to stand by Sonia's side. Alia gave her a side hug and whispered in her ears, "I got this boss. You go and deal with whatever you need to deal with. They will need a formal statement from you soon." Sonia looked at her gratefully, turned around and left the room quickly. Alia watched her go. She was trying to organize her thoughts before she addressed her team.

"Let it all out. Right now. Don't hold it in. But, remember what you are feeling right now. Print it on your brain! We shall find who killed Santosh and we shall punish them. Even if it is the last thing we ever do."

Carlos started crying and Nadia sat down next to him to put her hand around his shuddering shoulders. Tozi looked out of the window - her face blank. Alia sat down at her desk again and prayed that she would not throw the monitor at the wall. Anger seemed to have handily won the death match in her mind. Sadness was cowering away in the corner of the ring while anger was stomping around the ring just itching to throw a few more deadly punches.

Reflexively, Tozi glanced back at her monitor. She had received an email from an unknown address and it had a video file attached to it. Almost in a trance, she opened the file and the video automatically started streaming both on her monitor and the large screen in the incident room. In preparation for the briefing, she had already hooked her computer up to the large screen.

The entire screen filled up with Santosh's terrified face. His liquid brown eyes were wide open and staring fearfully at whoever was holding the camera. His mouth was taped up. His whimpering filled the incident room and everyone involuntarily stood up and started drifting toward the screen.

Alia snapped at Tozi, "what's this? Where did you find it?"

Tozi whispered, "I got an email with this attached to it. Just now."

"Boss - I have the same email," murmured Carlos.

Alia glanced at her monitor and saw that she had also received the same email. They all had received it. Sonia rushed into the room and then stopped abruptly at the door as she saw Santosh's face on the screen. She mutely nodded at Alia confirming that she had also received the email.

Alia waved at Tozi to continue playing the video.

Slowly, the camera zoomed out and they could see all of Santosh, trussed up with zip ties and sitting on a low chair. Subconsciously, all of them noted that there were absolutely no clues in the view. No marks or objects on the wall behind Santosh or anything lying around him at all. Just a blank wall of some grey-ish hue. The chair appeared to be a typical 3-D printed one. No distinguishing features at all. The picture steadied as the person holding the camera seemed to have attached it to some stand. The angle went a bit askew and then it was straightened up.

Then a black shadow spread across the screen as a person walked from behind the camera toward Santosh. Carlos was the only one who flinched reflexively but everyone had noticed the small knife glinting wickedly in the right hand of the killer. Nadia's hand went to her mouth as she realized what the video was about.

The black shadow resolved into a person towering over Santosh. The killer was dressed in a flowing black robe and the face was covered in a balaclava mask. Only the eyes and the mouth were visible. But the killer's figure was ever-so-slightly blurred to ensure that nothing was clearly articulated. The killer must have processed the video before sending it to ensure that he would not be recognized.

The sound of static filled the incident room. It seemed that the audio portion had also been passed through a distortion filter and then substituted for the original audio. A guttural sound issued as the killer cleared their throat and looked straight at them through the camera. The eyes of the killer were filled with anger. But then there was also some sort of excitement or maybe exhilaration as the killer had achieved his purpose. Despite the loose robe, it did seem like it was a man.

"For too long the non-believers have killed devout Muslim men for no reason. We shall no longer allow that to happen. We shall avenge the death of our brothers by killing non-believers. Glory to God!" the distorted machine-like voice intoned.

Then the killer raised the knife and in one smooth motion slit Santosh's throat. For a moment, Santosh's eyes stared in disbelief at what had happened to him. Then realization set in and incredibly, his eyes crinkled at the corners as if he was shyly smiling one last time. The blood had started gushing down his chest and the light went out of his eyes. The eyelids drooped and then his head leaned over slowly as the last breath left his body.

"You have been warned! If you don't treat us with respect, then next time the punishment would be far greater. This is a mere taste of what is in store for you if you don't comply!"

Abruptly, the video ended and desolation settled down on the incident room. The sound of people starting to breathe again reminded Alia that she too needed to breathe or else she would faint. There were very few people living in Sequoia that had not seen if not experienced horrific violence during their lives before they had come to live in Sequoia. Their childhoods had been littered with thoughtless violence of varying degrees. Sudden deaths were the norm. They had numbed themselves to those tragedies as they attempted to survive from one day to the next. In fact, this was the most fundamental survival mechanism that humans are born with - the ability to make oneself numb and forget in order to focus on the challenge in front or the one that is peeking from behind it next in line. But all this experience drawn from childhood was no match for the flood of emotions they were all experiencing that morning.

The last five years had changed the norms utterly. Sequoia was a truly safe place where violence was rare if it happened at all. Even verbal violence was rare. They knew that being kind to each other was the only path to healing both individually and collectively. They had forgotten that violence still existed because of those five years and how much it could hurt if it was allowed to enter their lives again. Now, with a terrifying decisiveness, violence had arrived in Sequoia. However much they had thought that they had left it far behind in their past, it had somehow managed to breach the defenses that Sequoia had put up and was forcing each of its citizens to confront it.

Alia had suffered through the tribal warfare in Iran as the Shias and Sunnis had fought each other. Similar tribal spirits seemed to have infected Sequoia. From two unfortunate and possibly unconnected murders, the situation had morphed into a war between the so-called believers and non-believers. What were they going to do now?

## Chapter Thirteen

A few days went by as the team interviewed pretty much all of the people that Nadeem had come in contact with. At work, Vidya indeed appeared to be the one who had talked the most with Nadeem, both professionally and personally. Alia had made Carlos bring her in for another interview, far more detailed, at the HQ. She was a bit daunted because it was at the police HQ and in one of those scary looking interview rooms - mirrored glass, glaring overhead light, simple table with hooks for handcuffs, and uncomfortable chairs. Despite this set up, Carlos was a lot more successful at putting her to ease this time around. No fainting spells. But, also no new insights from her.

Tozi had largely struck out with her database mining. The Interpol had given her restricted access to their database and she hadn't found anything relevant to the case. The Sudanese police were dragging their feet. Not because of any particular reason, just that this was a really low priority for them. Also, no one was really going to hold their feet to the fire, anyway. They had, vaguely, tried to finagle some funding from Interpol in return for cooperation. But the Interpol had conveniently acted as if they didn't get the hints. Tozi thought, briefly, of just hacking into the Sudanese databases. Then decided against it because the Sudanese servers seemed to be more offline than online because of power-cuts apart from all sorts of hardware and software problems. Her time was far too valuable for that.

Nadia had far more luck in finding a few leads from their other interviews. She had been exploring all other potential contacts. Nadeem was not a crazily social person like Nadia. But he did frequent some places for food and drinks. His preferred places were those that had live music. She had finished visiting the places that Nadeem seemed to have visited during the day-time and she was just getting started on the ones that Nadeem went to in the evenings.

In one of the interviews, she had gleaned that Nadeem had mentioned a bar called L&S. When she was updating the team about it, Alia decided that she would join Nadia for checking it out. Sonia had been reminding Alia that part of her job was to observe her team in the field and if needed, mentor them. Unlike Carlos, Alia had found Nadia to be quite good at interviews with people. So she had not prioritized tagging along with Nadia during the ongoing investigation. But this seemed like a good lead and Alia figured it was time to go hang out with Nadia and see how she was doing.

Nadia was an Arab woman - flashing dark eyes, fair but weather-beaten complexion, lustrous hair, and medium height. Her hair was streaked with purple and blue shades all throughout. She was the youngest in their team and also the most mischievous of all. At times, Sonia thought of her as a child and scolded her for all the pranks she pulled

on various unsuspecting members of the team. But beneath all that vivacious and outgoing demeanor was hidden a very keen mind that absorbed all that came her way like a sponge.

She had grown up in a house filled with brothers who at times - probably, most of the time - forgot that she was a girl and treated her just like a boy. Because of which she had become an excellent marksman and the most agile member of the team. Of course, as police, everyone had to undergo weapons training which Nadia aced right away and ended up becoming an instructor.

Most important of all, Nadia was the only member of the team who had a thriving social life, both in the real and the virtual world. Alia always wondered how Nadia found the time to do all the things that she did. In terms of access, it wasn't that hard to have a social life in Sequoia. Rather, the hard thing was to avoid a social life. Every residential building had a courtyard. These courtyards were communal spaces. During the long, dark, and cold winters the ceilings of these courtyards would be closed up. That is when they would become de facto common living rooms that served as the main places for socializing without having to leave the warmth of the building. For a social butterfly like Nadia, those were the best days as she could flit from one party to another all night, practically, every day.

In the police department, there was seldom any reason to call upon Nadia's physical skills. She usually got tagged to pick up the slack in whichever task that was short on staff. For the two murders, she was asked to focus on the social presence of the two victims and canvassing the neighborhoods in which the crime had occurred or where the victims lived and worked. Those social skills came in extremely handy for those tasks.

Both Alia and Nadia went home to change before they met up at L&S. Nadia was wearing a dress with a lot of glitter. When she walked or moved, it felt like she was floating a few inches above the ground. Alia, mentally, shrugged at the fashion choices that Nadia made. Also, those that Tozi made. Although, Tozi's were more about the makeup and accessories. Alia, herself, was dressed up in a relatively sober manner. Relative to Nadia, that is. By Alia's standards, she was flamboyant. She kept blushing all the time when she was dressing and Maria kept making inappropriate comments. Well, maybe not inappropriate, but definitely untimely. Alia was on the clock. It was not as if she could go late. Or could she?

Alia nodded at Nadia when they met at the door and they both headed in. L&S stood for Lily and Severus, from the Harry Potter universe. "Now that's interesting," thought Alia. She remembered that Lily was Harry's mom who had married Harry's dad, James Potter, while Severus Snape, Harry's teacher, had pined for Lily all his life.

They went up to the bar and sure enough, there was a guy dressed up like Snape with the long dark greasy hair and the black flowing robe. He was trying to glare like Snape did, but his eyes were way too humorous and twinkling for him to pull that off. On top of that, he had no sign of pasty white skin. He was brown and had lots of freckles. It just made him look funny instead of threatening. He winked at them while he finished serving a couple of other customers.

“Aren’t you that crazy gal from the Solstice party? Or was it the Equinox one?” he exclaimed when he recognized Nadia.

Of course he knew her, Alia thought. Sometimes she wondered if there was anyone left in Sequoia who hadn’t run into Nadia. And not remembered her. Nadia was not a celebrity. People knew her because they met her and she made such an impression on them, that they didn’t easily forget her. Nadia gave the bartender a broad smile and with mock humility, said, “Solstice it was!”

“I kinda felt that I had been here before, but couldn’t place it. Must be all those lovely drinks that you made for me that made me forget everything from that night!” she said while winking at him.

“Yeah right! You can hold your drinks, girl. The way you sashayed around the room, you were a total hit. I wish we could have you come around here all the time. So many customers remembered you and later asked about you!”

It was as if Alia was part of the furniture. The bartender and Nadia started chattering away at breakneck speed. Alia didn’t mind that at all. It gave her an opportunity to carefully scan the place. Sure enough, she spotted the supposed Lily Potter, the other bartender. No way were her eyes naturally that green! Her eye makeup was done in such a way as to make her eyes look almond-shaped. It kinda sorta worked. But not really. She was clearly east Asian. Her eyes were simply too narrow to pull that illusion off. She was wearing a midnight blue robe with stars and moons on it. She was also wearing a wizard’s peaked hat. She was busy making a large order of drinks and had not noticed Alia checking her out. Strictly professionally, that is.

Alia looked around the bar. It was not yet packed. But it seemed to be humming with a certain infectious energy. In the far corner, one guy wearing a shabby robe and round glasses actually appeared to be teaching a dozen or so customers. Alia had read the Potter novels after she came to Sequoia and had enjoyed them. She had watched the movies, too. Plus the TV adaption that came out recently. The movies were okay. A bit rushed, she felt. The TV show was much better, in her opinion. That had more magic in it than the movies. She had loved that. The TV show also had more space for the other characters in the story.



There were some beakers and flasks filled with colorful liquids that the "teacher" was using. The customers were all imbibing their drinks while trying their best to listen to their "teacher." The other tables seemed to have menus that customers seemed to be intently reading. Strange for a bar.

Suddenly, it dawned on Alia - why that particular name for the bar. Both Lily Potter and Severus Snape were excellent at the subject of Potions. In fact, Snape had been Harry's Potions master for several years and that "teacher" was probably Professor Slughorn who had taught both Lily and Snape when they were students at Hogwarts. This bar's theme was "Potions". Nice one!

She was in awe of the creativity of her fellow Sequoians. They came up with such fantastic and innovative ideas. She was dating one such artist - Maria. And worked with another - Tozi. She turned back to Nadia and Snape. She cleared her throat and gently nudged Nadia's elbow. Time to get to work! Nadia didn't show any sign of registering the two gestures, but she smoothly started her transition to interviewing Snape. Good!

"Hey, you know, I have been trying to find this guy I ran into a few months ago. I am hoping it was here at that Solstice party. He was a flautist and I remember chatting with him. Then another friend of mine was asking me the other day that she needed someone to play the flute in her new band. So... I thought about this guy...", Nadia trailed off. That "trailing off" trick usually worked quite well. Most people just couldn't help themselves from completing a sentence that was left hanging. Snape was no exception, he immediately obliged.

"I think you are referring to that guy who was murdered last week. Aren't you?"

"He died?" Nadia feigned surprise at this news. But she also was aware that she shouldn't push it too much. After all, practically everyone knew about the two deaths in Sequoia. Snape stared at her with twinkling eyes.

"Ohh... right... you know what? I do think it was him. Maybe that is why I thought about him. I must have seen his photo and something clicked somewhere. Sheesh... too bad he is dead!" Nadia sounded reasonably crestfallen.

Snape wasn't buying all this. He kept quiet for a beat. Then he looked at both Alia and Nadia, and said conspiratorially, "I know you guys are cops and are here asking about Nadeem!"

Neither of them showed their surprise which they, of course, were. Snape mischievously smiled.

“Now that was a good bit of magic, wasn’t it? I put the Legilimens spell on you and now I know everything in your mind!”

They both laughed out loud and he joined in with them.

“I used to be a cop and my dad was a cop and my uncle was a cop... I know cops. I tagged you the moment you walked in.”

“So why didn’t you volunteer to be a cop here?” Alia asked.

“Naah... I was done with that life. Like really really done. I wanted to do something totally different. I tried a whole bunch of things when I came. But nothing clicked.

Then one day, I was in an intro chemistry class and Lily was my partner in the lab. We discovered our common passion for the world of Harry Potter. Then we discovered that we liked all kinds of booze. Of course, a bar based on the Potions theme was the perfect fit for us. We actually started paying attention in the chemistry class after that. Later, we took every mixology course that we could find.”

He sighed as he looked at Lily.

“I was so smitten by him.” He smiled fondly.

When he saw the confused looks on their faces, he added, “Lily used to be Huy and he was so beautiful that I couldn’t keep my hands off him. Alas, he wanted to be a she, and just like in those novels, my love was gonna be unrequited. Hence, the name for the bar.

Of course, we are the bestest of friends. But still... I miss him... like... a lot!”

He made a face. Lily must have caught sight of it and she bustled over.

“Did he just tell you his sad love story?” she asked them.

She ruffled his greasy hair and gave his shoulders a quick squeeze.

Then she looked at them questioningly.

“Did he forget to make you a drink?”

“Ohh... no... he did ask.

Actually, we are cops and here on duty.

We heard that Nadeem used to hang out here at times and we were just asking him about it.”

Lily frowned at that.

“Yeah... he came here a few times.”

“Do you mind answering a few questions?” Nadia assumed control of the interview. She had switched over seamlessly from a party girl to all business in a flash. Alia was quite proud of her.

“When did you last see him?”

“A few days ago. Maybe... a week?” Lily looked at Snape and he nodded.

“Do you have an exact date? Thursday? Friday? Wednesday?” Nadia probed.

“I think it was Thursday.”

Both Nadia and Alia held their breath. Were they in luck? Was Nadeem here the same day he was killed? That would be a fantastic break!

“Are you sure about that?”

Snape chimed in, “yes - it was last Thursday. That’s the day our Dumbledore had unexpectedly taken the day off.”

“Umm... what?” Alia exclaimed.

“I mean... we have a Slughorn and a Dumbledore who run mock classes on mixology Tuesdays-Thursdays-Saturdays.

This guy - Nadeem - he was kinda keen on the Dumbledore. Always trying to chat him up,” Snape explained.

“Nadeem had come in looking quite excited about something. Said he couldn’t wait to tell it to Dumbledore. But our Dumbledore had an upset stomach. Wrong potion, apparently.

Or maybe too much potion, more likely!” Lily said, sarcastically.

“Nadeem was quite disappointed,” she added seriously.

“What happened next?” Nadia asked.

“It was a busy night for us. So it is all a bit jumbled up. I think, he did stick around for a bit at the bar. I made a drink for him - on the house - I kinda felt sorry for him.”

“Did he leave after that drink? Talk with someone? Can you remember anything else?”

“Not really. I remember making that drink for him and kinda nudging him to get going after that. We don’t need sad puppies in here dampening the vibe... if you know what I mean,” Snape said with a knowing look.

“Me neither. I was running the other class in place of Dumbledore. So - I wasn’t behind the bar that night. I did see him sitting there. That’s all.”

Nadia and Alia looked at each other. At least, they now had one of the last places Nadeem visited that night. But still not much to go on with. Nadia pursed her lips.

Seeing their disappointment, Lily said, “why don’t you ask the people around here?”

“These folks are regulars. They were probably here that Thursday, too. Do you want me to announce?”

Nadia vigorously nodded.

“Potions students!” Lily shouted at the top of her voice. The buzz got subdued as everyone turned toward her.

“Looks like last Thursday that guy who died recently had been here. Did any of you see him?”

Like... talking with someone?

If you know something then please come up here and help these two detectives.”

Lots of exclamations got tossed around but no one made a move toward the bar. Then a small group of people came over and said that they had seen Nadeem sit at the bar.

“Did you see anything else? Maybe... anyone talk with him?” Nadia keenly looked at them. They seemed a bit too high, to her. To be of use, that is. But no harm in asking, she felt.

One of them said, “I am not sure if he knew the lady sitting next to him. But I saw them talking.”

Maybe they were getting somewhere, Alia fervently hoped. Hell, this might even be the killer.

“Can you describe this lady? Did you hear any of what they were talking about?” Nadia asked.

“No - I was at the other side of the room. I was at the Slughorn table. I just saw them.”

“How about a description of the lady?”

“She was tall. Or more like big. She was bigger than you,” the woman said pointing to Alia who was definitely on the larger side when it came to women.

“Okay. What was she wearing? How did she look like? Anything that can help us identify her?”

“She was dark. Black. Yeah... she was black. She had the light behind her... so I couldn’t really make out her features. But she was black. I am sure of that. She was wearing some loose clothes. I didn’t pay attention to that.”

“A big black lady, then?” Nadia tried to get confirmation.

“Yeah. Definitely.”

“Okay.”

She looked around to see if anyone else had any more information. But no one else

came forward.

She and Alia thanked the bartenders and left. They had a vague but still a description of a potential suspect.

Outside, they noticed a few folks smoking at the corner. They wandered over there and Nadia bummed a smoke from one of them. She lit up and casually asked, “were any of you here last Thursday, by any chance?”

The smokers gave them a cool appraising look and a couple of them nodded, “yes. We were here that day.”

“See anything unusual that night?”

“Unusual? Not really. L&S customers are quite high when they step out... so we always see a few stumbling around before they find their way. Nothing different last week, either.”

Out of curiosity, Alia asked, “does anyone fall down? Like too drunk to walk?”

Lots of chuckles and a few affirmatives erupted from the group.

“Of course. What do you expect?”

“Who helps those drunks then?”

“Well - we do. I mean, unless someone else comes along to take them away.”

“See anything like that, last Thursday?” Alia warily asked.

“Yeah... I think we saw a guy who could barely stand up. He staggered out and was almost about to fall when his partner, this big woman came out and slipped her hand around his shoulder to support him.”

“Really? What happened next?” both Alia’s and Nadia’s hearts were beating fast now.

“We were about to go help him, but she waved us off. So we got back to our smokes.”

“What did she look like? Did you see her face?”

"Yeah... she was black. Like... really dark. There isn't much light here in the shadows... so... I don't know about her face. Anyways... what difference does it make. Why do you care?"

"Oh... nothing... just curious. That's all," Nadia said nonchalantly blowing off smoke rings. She flicked some ash away and looked in the distance.

"Did you see where that woman took that drunk?"

"Naah... they went around that corner. Didn't see them after that. I was watching just to make sure that they both didn't fall down."

"Hmm... too bad. It would have been great to have know where they went," Nadia said wistfully blowing out another smoke ring.

Someone else chimed up, "I heard a van's whine soon after they turned the corner. They could have gone in it."

Bingo! That must be the killer. Both Alia and Nadia looked at each other in the same instant. They had indeed caught a break. About time, thought Alia.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sara had been hiding as much as possible over the last few days. She went out only for her classes and work. Even then, she had taken to wearing a hoodie and masculine clothes. Anything that would cover up her complexion and the fact that she was a woman. Someone at L&S had overheard the back-and-forth that Alia and Nadia had with the smokers outside the bar. Then that person had promptly mentioned it online and it had become public information.

With a sickening feeling, Sara had read that the cops were looking for a large black woman. There were tens of thousands of black women in Sequoia and many were large, whatever that meant to the cops. It had indeed been her who had sat next to Nadeem at L&S that evening. She couldn't have avoided it. She had to drug his drink so that she could stuff him in her van. She thought that she had been unobtrusive. But alas, she had been seen and even if the description was vague, it did match her. She had no idea if the cops had discovered any additional information about her. As far as she could tell, there was nothing else that connected her to Nadeem. Still, it was better to stay out of sight. No point in attracting any attention, if she could help it. What she couldn't help was, was having regular panic attacks.

That is why, she could not believe her luck when she saw the news about the terrorist attack in Vatican City. Of course, she agonized over the deaths of the innocent tourists since that was a direct consequence of her actions. Then she heard about the retaliatory massacres in Washington DC and New Delhi which made her feel even more guilty. When the explosive video of Santosh's murder swept through Sequoia, she found herself in a very dark place indeed. Her nightmares were entirely composed of different forms of punishments that she was being subjected to.

The second emotion, initially a mere spark somewhere at the back of her mind, was that of relief. Slowly but surely, that spark grew stronger and forced itself from the back of her mind to the front. She not only became fully aware of it, she started nourishing it. A sense of exultation spread across her entire body as she told herself that if the two murders were being considered to be linked and it was turning into a conventional tribal confrontation, then she was going to be safe.

She had, of course, no idea who Qasim was and she definitely did not know who had killed him and why. She started convincing herself that the rapid global escalation of events would diminish the importance of solving the murders. All the attention would switch over to preventing the escalation from affecting Sequoia. It was quite curious how her initial compassionate impulse - the pity she felt for the world-wide victims and Santosh - was surprisingly quickly replaced by an almost entirely self-centered interest in preserving herself whatever the cost.



In her mind, regardless of the fact that her actions had resulted in deaths of many innocents, Nadeem deserved to die. He was the leader of the band of thugs who had laid waste entire villages in Darfur. He had to be punished, swiftly and decisively. She had delivered justice because others had failed to do so. No doubt, she thought, Nadeem had powerful friends who had helped him to leave Darfur, unpunished.

She even told herself that he was sent to Sequoia for causing the same kind of harm that he had done in Darfur. By killing him, she had simply made sure that he wouldn't be able to damage Sequoia. But a small voice in her head would firmly insist that the damage to Sequoia had been done after all. Santosh had died an untimely death. The damage was also spreading across the world.

Sequoia had also caught the fever that had spread around the world like a plague. People had started looking at each other with suspicion. Seemingly overnight, overt displays of anger had materialized out of nowhere. Minor confrontations between the generally phlegmatic citizens of Sequoia had started mushrooming into full-blown fights, fortunately, often verbal and seldom physical. The powerful muscle memory of normalized violence that resided in each and every citizen of Sequoia had been brought forth, at last.

Everyone, as if ordered by someone, had started segregating themselves in their tribes. As if whatever unique and beautiful identity that they had painstakingly cultivated for themselves over the past five years had been wiped off by a dirty rag to reveal the ugliness within. Were their new selves so superficial that they could be discarded so easily? Or had they never really let go of their former selves, the ones they had been born with?

All Sara knew at the moment was that she did not want to be caught and forced to leave Sequoia. She did not care about the other consequences of her actions. She had run into Shahid while she had been stalking Nadeem. She had struck up a conversation with him while she had waited for Nadeem to show up on one of the days. Once she had sussed out Shahid's overall personality - a bit dim and paranoid while also being shy when it came to talking with girls - she had decided to play the part of a demure and devout Muslim girl. She had used him to know as much about Nadeem's social life and his routine as possible. Even though she had loomed over Shahid, the impression that she had conveyed was that of a shy Muslim girl who was diffidently asking him for tips about running a cafe. Shahid had opened up quite easily and had, in fact, become quite talkative. In his expansive monologues, he had never noticed how he had been frequently nudged to talk about his neighbors, especially, Nadeem.

Sara took to stalking the online forums in the aftermath of Santosh's murder and she soon noticed that Shahid had become quite a vocal defender of Santosh's murderer. She hadn't been able to bring herself to view Santosh's video in its entirety even once, but she had caught some snippets of it. A couple of times, she felt that there was a hint

of Shahid in Santosh's murderer. The voice had been distorted but the words were just as stilted as she remembered Shahid's had been. The murderer had also seemed to be stocky and short despite the free-flowing robe. She couldn't imagine that shy barista having the guts to abduct a cop and then kill that cop in a gruesome way on video. But what did she know of people anyway? On the face of it, even Nadeem's appearance had not exactly advertised that he used to be the leader of a gang of killers. Nadeem had looked like a sad and lonely guy, quite harmless.

The sudden spate of extreme violence around the world including that in Sequoia had somewhat dampened the ardor of most folks for more violence. No one in Sequoia really wanted to see things get completely out of hand and lead to more violence. They all had everything at stake in Sequoia. No one wanted to ever leave Sequoia and go back to whatever hell they had all come from. Tensions simmered and got vented verbally, but outright violence was still in check.

All of this was happening, voluntarily. It was not as if the Sequoia police force had to be deployed to manage the situation. And that was not good for Sara. If the Sequoia police were not out in the streets maintaining the peace, then they were trying to solve the murders. She had looked up the lead investigator's record. Alia had no experience when it came to solving murders but her record at solving other crimes was topnotch. This was one smart cop who was no doubt spending all her time figuring out who Nadeem's murderer was.

Sara needed to change this situation as quickly as possible and she was trying to decide whether Shahid could be used to distract the cops. What had to happen was some good old-fashioned rioting on the streets to get all the cops to leave behind the murder investigation and do some fire-fighting, metaphorical as well as real.

It was not difficult to manufacture a scenario to trigger Shahid into taking some extravagant action. The tricky part was ensuring that there was a critical mass of people around him who would in turn fan the flames into a substantive altercation. Ideally, it would be good to have that altercation evolve into a full blown riot. But she would be okay if it was just an altercation involving a crowd and not just one that was between two individuals.

Sara found that opportunity almost immediately after she had decided on her plan of action. Early in the day, she was picking up an order in one of the warehouse districts of Sequoia. As usual, the warehouse district was most crowded at that time of the day because everyone was stocking up. Shahid happened to be negotiating for bulk coffee at the warehouse next to the one Sara was loading up at.

She heard his voice clearly and recognized him without having to look at him. He was agitated because the warehouse didn't have sufficient stock of the particular brand of

coffee that he wanted to purchase. Shahid had started dressing in all black clothes including a black turban in the last few days. The guy he was talking to seemed to be a Caucasian guy who was wearing a conspicuously large cross on a chain hanging around his neck. There was even a cross with Jesus stuck on the wall behind the counter. Overt displays of religiosity had substantially ticked up since the death of Santosh.

Shahid shouted, "you imperialist infidels are always trying to shortchange us Muslims. Why can't you sell the stock that you have to me?"

The seller glared at Shahid and made a brief gesture to one of his colleagues. Just in case Shahid decided to go beyond shouting, the seller wanted to make sure that he had backup.

Shahid continued his rant, "you are all the same. For centuries you have looted us. We have slaved for you. It is never enough for you. Even here in Sequoia, you are oppressing us. GIVE THAT STOCK TO ME!"

Sara quickly dumped her load into the van, locked it up, and wandered over to Shahid's side. She plastered a bewildered look on her face. She had also wrapped a scarf around her head in a typical Muslim manner.

She stuttered, "what happened, brother Shahid? What seems to be the problem?"

Shahid looked crossly at her and then seemed to recognize her. He also noticed the scarf and his face softened into a smile. She was one of HIS people.

The seller gave her a withering look and turned back to Shahid, "Sir - that stock has been reserved for another customer who will be here later today to pick it up. I don't have any deliveries coming in until the next week. If you want, you can order for next week."

"Who is this special customer? Must be one of your kind," Shahid glanced disdainfully at the cross on the wall.

"Sir, please could you consider brother Shahid's request and maybe inform your other customer to wait until next week?" Sara stepped forward and reached out to touch the seller's arm. Instinctively, the seller shrugged his arm as if to free himself. The tensions were running high all the time and the seller was in no mood of getting double-teamed by these Muslims.

Sara was no light-weight. But she used that shrug of the seller to somehow engineer a

stumble and a loud scream as if the seller had violently pushed her to the ground. She stumbled backward and fell down in a dramatic manner. She would have put to shame any professional footballer who routinely and theatrically fell down without ever being touched by the opposition players, all in an effort to eke out a penalty kick.

Shahid was stunned. Violence was still not instinctive for him. Sara was going to have egg him on some more. She whimpered pathetically as if her wrist had been broken. That seemed to do the trick. Instead of helping her, Shahid launched himself at the seller. He had to protect his people - a Muslim woman at that - from these infidels. He was short and the slap that he aimed at the seller from across the counter barely scraped the guy's face. But that was enough for the seller to retaliate with a punch of his own to Shahid's jaw.

"Good," Sara thought. Now it was time to pull in some reinforcements. She flailed around shouting at bystanders, "they are attacking us. Just like they had attacked Qasim and Nadeem. HELP! Please save us."

At least a dozen people, all presumably Muslim, immediately started running toward Shahid and her. At the same time, the seller's colleagues closed ranks around him.

"Time to fan this small flame into an inferno," thought Sara. She jabbed a finger fearfully and also angrily at the seller, "he threw me to the ground and then punched Shahid. We had done nothing to him. Brother Shahid was only demanding his right as a customer. It was only fair. But they will never treat us as their equals. They will always look down upon us and treat us like dirt. They have done that for hundreds of years. They will never stop!"

That was that. The two sides, all men, closed in on each other and a regular fist-fight erupted. Sara was pleased with the outcome. For a brief moment, she thought, maybe she should have gone for a career in acting. She was a natural. She swung a couple of good punches in. Then she conveniently stepped back and called the cops. There already had been a couple of calls made about the fight and the cops were getting into gear. They told her to step away as far as possible from the melee. For good measure, Sara threw in a couple of hearty sobs in the call and then hung up.

By then quite a few folks had joined in and the air was thick with all kinds of things flying around. This being the warehouse district, quite a few of them were heavy boxes. No one seemed to be holding back in throwing them at whoever caught their eye. Sara noticed a few scrapes and bruises but no blood in sight, yet. She fully expected that to change as the volume and frequency of the shouts kept going up. There it was - someone had finally drawn some blood. It was one of the seller's colleagues whose nose had been broken and copious amounts of blood was streaming down his face and shirt.

That inflamed the fighters further. Someone had lit a box on fire and threw it inside the warehouse where the flames quickly grew. There was a lot of combustible material stored there. The sprinklers instantly turned on but the fire appeared to be winning the initial round. A bit of lull dawned on the crowd as everyone looked at the fire and the sprinklers raining down water on it. In that quiet moment, the sound of the sirens crept up surreptitiously at first and then was suddenly upon them and no one could hear each other talk at all. Some of the fighters half-heartedly tried to throw a few more punches at their opponents but the fire and wailing sirens had taken the wind out of most of them. The cop vans screeched in, followed closely by a fire engine and an ambulance.

Sonia and Alia led a dozen police officers into the middle of the riot as the fire-fighters rushed into the warehouse to squelch the already fading flames. The severely hurt people were taken to the ambulance and then the police lined up all the rioters by the wall. Sara slipped away from the scene unobserved or at least that's what she thought. But Alia had noticed her. Alia felt that she had seen that big black woman a few times in recent days but couldn't place her. In any case, she was distracted by the task at hand.

The rioters were to be arrested and taken to the jail until the powers-to-be decided what was to be done with them. Luckily, no one had died. There were lots of cuts and bruises but nothing that would require hospitalization. As she was scanning the long line of rioters, at least four dozen in all, she saw Shahid. She hadn't recognized him earlier because the left side of his face was red and rapidly turning into purple. "Was that a coincidence?" Alia wondered. Finally, the boiling point had been reached in Sequoia. The pressure on her to solve the murders had just gone up by a few more notches.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sonia was surprised to get the call from Kaija. Although it was symbolic in nature, Kaija was the designated mayor of Sequoia. Also, Kaija was the sole non-refugee resident of Sequoia. In fact, Kaija was Norwegian-born and -bred.

Kaija hardly spoke in the City Council meetings. But the few times that Kaija did speak, she had caught Sonia's attention. She was not completely sure about who Kaija was except for one thing - it seemed that Kaija had been a key person in the creation of Sequoia. Because of that one reason, Sonia was eternally grateful to her. She had never expressed her gratitude to Kaija, but she felt it strongly whenever she dwelt on that fateful day when her life had taken a turn for the amazing - the day when she found out that she was leaving Bangladesh for good.

Apart from the gratitude, Sonia genuinely respected Kaija. In her opinion, Kaija was an innately kind and generous person. A considerate person who thought carefully before she uttered a single word. A democratic person who carefully listened to all and treated everyone respectfully. Without exception! This was no act, Sonia had observed.

Kaija was part of that community of good white people that she had come to grudgingly respect. Sonia hadn't liked white people, in general, before she came to Sequoia. Her experience with white people in Bangladesh was based on the white tourists she had interacted with during the couple of years she had served in Dhaka, the capital of the nation. In her view, they were voyeurs at best and obnoxious racists at worst. They came to ogle at the poverty and exotic aspects of Bengali society. They shot videos and left. They tended to treat most of the Bengalis with contempt and suspicion. She had learned enough of English language in high school to be able to eavesdrop on the conversations the white tourists had among themselves. Most of the time, it was not nice.

Then she had to deal with them - as a junior sub-inspector in her police station - when they came in to file complaints about theft. That is when the racism dripped not just from their mouths but emanated from their entire bodies. The way they wouldn't even sit down when a chair was offered to them. As if the chair was too filthy or disease-ridden and they couldn't wait to get out of the police-station. She had met some good white people, the ones who came to her country and stayed. The ones who lived and worked with her people. The ones who never complained. The ones who treated her and her people as, well, people should be treated anywhere in the world. But these good ones were a tiny minority.

Sonia had been so strongly prejudiced against white people that she had almost not applied to Sequoia. Somehow sanity had prevailed and she had sent in her application

just before the deadline was up. She had forgotten all about it until the day she received the official letter at her police-station. She hadn't known what to think of it and for several days didn't even tell anyone that she had been selected. Gradually though, it had become clear to her that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for her to escape the misogyny she had faced all her life.

She had always been an excellent cop and she had been fully aware of that. Even better, she had also been a natural leader. If she had been a man, she would have been on the fast-track to success right from the beginning of her career. Alas, she was a woman and every single man, irrespective of his rank, had hated the fact that she was so obviously better than them in every aspect of their jobs. So she had gotten shunned and then eventually, dumped in a village where she had been destined to live the rest of her life in anonymity. The silver lining - if one could say that - to her situation had been that the village got designated as uninhabitable in the process for selecting new residents for Sequoia.

She was unambiguously happy to be in Sequoia. Her extraordinary skills and experience had been so obvious to the UN team responsible for setting up the law-and-order system that she had immediately been appointed as the Police Chief in Sequoia.

Sonia had never really been sure of why Kaija had chosen to permanently leave Oslo and her family in order to move to Sequoia. That was an absolutely baffling decision in Sonia's view. As a city, Oslo, was as good a city that ever existed in human history. Who would want to leave it? Anyway, someday she would find the right moment to ask Kaija about it.

Until that evening, Kaija had never invited Sonia to her home. They had never really hung out in a social setting. It had mostly been a professional but caring relationship. Sonia knew that Kaija had been scheduled to speak at the General Assembly of the UN as the representative of Sequoia. Sonia had briefed Kaija and the rest of the City Council the day before. What could Kaija want to discuss this late in the day and at her home?

Kaija's building appeared to have missed the attention of most mural artists for some reason. There was minimal artwork. For once, the building looked like an old-fashioned apartment building and nothing more than that. Sonia took the elevator to the top floor and rang the bell to Kaija's apartment. A moment later, the door opened and Kaija warmly welcomed her.

The apartment was done up in a very unusual way. It was the same size and general layout as most other flats in Sequoia. But the interior seemed to have almost a primitive feel to it. Like a log cabin out in the wilderness. Seeing modern appliances within the

space felt odd. It felt as if Kaija had tried to recreate something from memory. Quite a few pieces were extremely old and suggested a distinct culture that Sonia was ignorant about.

She had always, in a generic sort of way, assumed that the primary history of Nordic countries consisted of Vikings. Basically, the gorgeous Thor. As a young girl, she had watched the Thor movies and ogled at the guy playing Thor. She didn't much remember the movies themselves. Maybe they had not even been about Thor. Her eyes, though, had been fixed on him whenever he was on screen and yearning to see him when he was not. The decor in Kaija's home had nothing in common with all that Viking stuff Sonia had seen in those movies. There were pictures of reindeers roaming the Arctic landscape sprinkled around the living room.

Kaija was keenly watching Sonia take in her apartment. She felt a sense of comfort when she saw that Sonia had not judged her home but simply observed it with interest and curiosity. She liked Sonia, too. The evening, though, was not meant to be a social occasion. She sat down at the chair behind her desk. There was another chair set up next to hers and she invited Sonia to sit next to her.

"Thanks for coming over to my home. We are going to be doing a video call together. I was explicitly asked to include you in it and that we should call from a secure location where no one could overhear our conversation."

Sonia sat down and raised one of her eyebrows at the same time. This was strange. She had assumed that Kaija wanted to talk confidentially about the murder investigation and the riot and maybe the general law-and-order situation in Sequoia. The last thing she had expected was a video call with someone. Clearly, with someone who was outside Sequoia. Who could that be? She nodded her head and waited for Kaija to elaborate. Instead Kaija clicked on a link that dialed someone. Instantly, the screen filled up with the faces of two women sitting next to each other.

The woman with blonde hair and blue eyes spoke. She seemed to be about the same age as both Sonia and Kaija, in her mid to late thirties. She was wearing a formal beige shirt and had tied her shoulder-length hair in a sensible pony-tail.

"My name is Rachel and this is Camille," she said leaning her head toward the woman sitting next to her. Camille seemed to be a bit younger, maybe late twenties. She had dark red wavy hair and gray eyes. She was wearing one of those leather jackets that was severely weathered just like the face of its owner. While both Rachel and Camille were white, the latter seemed to be spending most of her time outdoors and the former indoors.

"Thanks for taking this call," continued Rachel. Then she smiled. A lovely warm smile



that reached her eyes and the blue in them lit up like the summer sky at noon.

“Kaija, we met once, a long time ago. I am not sure you remember me,” she said. Then looked at Sonia and added, “you must be Sonia. Glad to meet you!”

Rachel’s warmth was so infectious that without realizing it both Kaija and Sonia smiled back at her. Their shoulders had been hunched when they had started the video call. That is when Kaija recognized Rachel. The kindness in her expression was what reminded her of that moment several years ago when she had visited the land that would soon become Sequoia. Kaija had been there to say one last goodbye to her best friend buried there. Kaija had been sitting next to the grave and lovingly smoothing the turf overgrown with wildflowers. She hadn’t realized that her eyes had welled up as she sat there until a woman wearing the UN hard-hat had kneeled down next to her and patted her back kindly. That woman was Rachel. Kaija had never seen her again or heard from her until today. It was so strange to be reminded of that part of her life. She nodded in recognition and Rachel’s smile broadened some more.

“Let’s get the introductions out of the way and then we can talk.

By the way, we are calling from New York city.

I am with the US delegation stationed at the UN. I serve as the deputy ambassador. In my own way, I helped with the creation of Sequoia.

Camille also played a crucial role in the creation of Sequoia. She - well, let’s just say that she is part of a global network of folks that are trying to end carbon dioxide emissions as quickly as possible.”

Rachel turned and winked at Camille, “did I get that right?”

“It is accurate and of course, we are not going to get into the details of our methods,” replied Camille solemnly.

“Kaija is, I guess, the person most responsible for the creation of Sequoia.”

Camille nodded her head vigorously and looked with frank admiration at Kaija.

Kaija blushed slightly and mildly said, “you give me too much credit. There are far too many people who must have worked tirelessly to make Sequoia a reality.”

Sonia noticed that this was not the usual modesty that most people showed when

being praised. Kaija's eyes had a distant look in them and she seemed to mean every word of it.

"I kept Sonia's introduction for the last because there is a crucial difference between the three of us and her. While we have helped in creating Sequoia, the future of the city and the idea behind it now depends on Sonia."

Both of Sonia's eyebrows shot up instantly. She had been politely listening to Rachel. With that statement, though, she sensed that this was not a social call but something far more serious. Later she would think that it was not just a serious but an existential conversation.

"Let me explain...", added Rachel.

## END OF PART 1 ##